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SPRAGUE'S CANYON

HORACE ANNESLEY VACHEL

Fiction, English

~~M. A. Lunt~~

129 East 20th St.

New York City



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Va. 200



SPRAGGE'S CANYON

HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL



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Spragge's Canyon

A Character Study

By HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL, 1861
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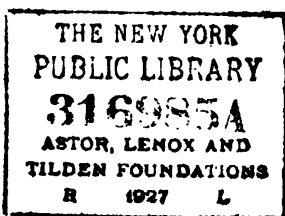
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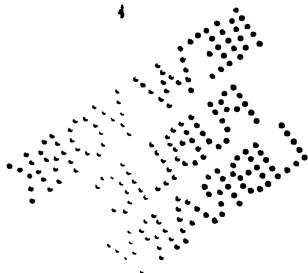
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MY DEAR OLD FRIEND
GEORGIANA PARKS BALLARD
I DEDICATE THIS BOOK

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SPRAGGE'S CANYON

SPRAGGE'S CANYON

CHAPTER I

THE CONDOR'S EYRIE

I

SAMANTHA'S heart began to beat furiously as she looked upward. Upon the stark face of the cliff a man was climbing, slowly surmounting the obstacles which lay between him and a condor's eyrie. Above, with menacing beaks and talons, swooped the huge birds, monstrous not only in size and strength, but shudderingly evil in appearance, black against the azure sky, the great vultures of California, huge as the condors of the Andes, and much more rare. The girl followed their flight with gray eyes dimmed by tears, for the impending peril to the climber had cleared her inward vision.

She realized that she loved George Spragge as the possibility of losing him became more insistent. Her own position upon a sharp point of rock was none too secure. Two hundred feet below surged the Pacific. The great combers seemed to be roaring like wild beasts hungry for an eluding prey. They broke with fury upon the kelp-covered rocks, advancing thunderously, retreating with strange moanings and hissings. Samantha looked down, seeking the exact spot where George would fall if the black devils swooped——!

Spragge's Canyon

With a valiant effort she rallied her failing energies, telling herself that neither the devils above nor the deep sea below would destroy this strong man, in whose strength she exulted riotously.

Beholding her at this moment, you would have said that she was beautiful, a true daughter of the wilderness, more, a daughter of the West, fit to be the companion and helpmeet of a man whose forbears had crossed the plains, braving death hourly, death from starvation or drought, death from wild beasts, death from Indians crueller than wild beasts.

She was built upon a noble plan, a big woman wide of hip and shoulder, full-breasted, such a one as might have delighted the eyes of the father of the great Frederick, ever seeking fine mothers for fine men.

Her face in repose had a bovine placidity. Her gray eyes, set a thought too far apart, conveyed the impression of a vision wider than normal, panoramic, as if heretofore she had practiced the rare faculty of observation rather than the feminine instinct which manifests itself in courting the observation of others. Her skin was a clear red-brown; her hair had been bleached by wind and sun to the tint of dry bunch-grass. It was gathered in loose masses about her head. She had taken off a flapping linen sunbonnet, so that she could see every movement of the climber.

One of the huge birds swooped. Samantha uttered a cry of warning. But George was ready. He carried a short, thick stick. The condor seemed to miss the mark. It soared upward again, rejoining its mate. Upon outstretched, motionless wings the two vultures continued their circling flight.

The Condor's Eyrie

The climber was approaching the eyrie, which held two young birds, great masses of fluff from which protruded big heads and beaks. The beaks were wide open. George had reached the steep slope just below the nest, the most difficult part of the ascent, partly because the serpentine rock was smooth and slippery, but more especially because the nest, such as it was, lay upon a jutting slab in which lay streaks of jasper and chalcedony.

He paused for a moment, looking down.

He could see Samantha's upturned face, and the agonized anxiety in her gray eyes. Her voice floated to him:

"Come back, George."

He frowned and set his jaw, vouchsafing no reply. Women, he reflected, with a mild contempt, were like that, poor things! They got scared when confronted with big obstacles. He remembered that his grandmother, a brave woman, too, had told him when he was a child stories of that amazing journey across the plains in a prairie schooner. She used to admit to the boy that she had wanted to turn back, but her husband, the pioneer, had gone on and on, deaf to her entreaties.

"Come back!" shouted Samantha in a shriller tone.

"Stop yer noise," commanded George.

He began to climb again, upward and outward, till he hung for a breathless second between sea and sky. Then he drew himself over the ledge. The birds swooped and Samantha screamed. George lifted his cudgel. He felt an odd lust for battle. He wanted to measure his strength and his wits against these horrible birds. Once he had been attacked by a mountain lion at bay. The beast

Spragge's Canyon

was prepared to fight and George knew it. And he had shouted at it, daring it to come on, inviting the deadly spring. But the great cat, meeting his fearless glance, had refused the challenge. That had been the finest moment in his life, the instinctive realization of power, the sense of mastery so dear to primal man.

This second experience was sweeter, because a woman was looking on.

The birds soared upward. George grasped one of the nestlings and stuffed it into a big wheat sack. The stench from the nest assailed him. Sweat broke all over his body as he tied the sack to the end of a cord and began to lower it. For this reason he had asked Samantha to accompany him.

"Got it?" he shouted.

"Yes."

He slid over the edge of the rock, hanging by his hands, groping for his foothold, unable to find it. For an eternity—so it seemed to him—his bare toes searched the slippery surface of the rock. The stench and the heat—for the sun beat fiercely upon the cliff—began to overpower him.

"I'm a goner," he thought, "but I done it. I got the bird."

Samantha saw what had happened.

"Higher up," she yelled.

He drew up his quivering, bleeding feet. By heaven, the girl was right. He had miscalculated the distance. His curling toes found the crevice. A second later he was safe.

Man and maid descended in silence to the beach below.

The Condor's Eyrie

"You saved me," he said curtly.

"Oh, George."

"Yes, you did. It was nip and tuck, the closest call I hev ever had. Lucky you came, eh?"

"You'd never have been crazy enough to try it alone?"

"I dunno. Mebbe."

Samantha made one comment.

"Men are silly to risk their lives for so little."

He stared at her.

"Little? There ain't another condor in captivity anywheres. I'll sell this one for two hundred and fifty dollars."

"You value your life at that?"

She spoke disdainfully, angry with herself, and angry with him, because he had unbared her weakness.

"It'll be in the papers," he laughed. "They'll be wantin' my photograph. You see!"

They carried the bird home and ministered to it, stuffing carrion into its insatiable maw.

"I hate the beast," remarked Samantha.

"Why?"

But she would not say.

II

The ranch house stood in a narrow, wooded canyon, which sloped southwesterly to the ocean. From the upper window you could behold the Pacific, a palpitating pool of blue framed by scrub oak and pine. A creek wandered down the canyon, and upon each bank were berry patches, which could be irrigated. George made a good living in many ways. He raised early potatoes and

Spragge's Canyon

berries, particularly strawberries. He had many hives. Also he peddled clams, which he dug out of the sand, and fish. In and out of season he sold venison, having scant regard for the game laws. For the rest, he bred cattle, horses and hogs, and collected wild animals, which he took to a dealer. Rattlesnakes, for example, were a small source of income.

Mrs. Spragge, his mother, assisted by Samantha, a second cousin, kept house for him. She owned an undivided half-interest in the ranch. Always there had been a rough plenty, and something substantial to lay by for a rainy day which never came. The ranch itself was just three hundred and twenty acres, a homestead and preëmption claim; it lay snug among hills covered with chaparral, a wild part of Uncle Sam's domain hitherto neglected by the squatter.

The canyon was marked on the county map as Spragge's Canyon. George's father had taken up the homestead long before George was born. He had made it peculiarly his own, a tiny paradise reclaimed by incredible labor from the wilderness. Only those who have created something out of what is regarded by the world as nothing can form any estimate of how that something may be secretly worshiped by its creator. George had inherited from his sire this love of Spragge's Canyon. To him it was just right, the sweetest spot in God's country. He smiled derisively when thrusters of the true American type, raw-boned fellows from New England or Kentucky, asked him why he didn't up and join the procession of citizens who toiled and moiled in pursuit of the nimble dollar. Why didn't he sell out and start a store?

The Condor's Eyrie

He never answered such questions.

Nevertheless, alone with his mother, he repeated what had been said. Mrs. Spragge, a large, homely creature, with a retentive memory, would murmur drawlingly:

"We've a plenty to eat and wear. We own our place. It's paid for. Everything's paid for. What call have we to worry, with good food in our stomachs and peace in our hearts?"

"That Sheeney, Adolf Geldenheimer, says there's no 'get up' to me."

"You get up earlier than him, my son. Pay no attention to such fullishness."

"By gum! I don't—and won't."

"That's my own boy."

"There isn't a son-of-a-gun in the hull crowd that I couldn't whip with one hand tied behind my back."

"That's so. Your father could fight some, but you're heftier than he was."

"We're O.K."

His self-satisfaction, his ingenuous pleasure in a life so humble, was never offensive to the "get up and get there" strivers. Cattlemen, rare judges of character, respected George. He was "straight," and he could ride anything with hair on, from a bull calf to a bucking broncho. He could be trusted to drive cattle slowly; he was knowledgable about colts, halter-breaking them to perfection; in fine, a vaquero of the true breed, as distinguished from the swearing, gun-carrying, saloon-haunting cowboy, who squandered his wages upon wine and women.

George drank water.

And it was known that he had never been in love.

Spragge's Canyon

III

That particular fact caused his robust mother some anxiety. The desire to cuddle grandchildren flamed within her ample bosom. She loved to see young things about her, chickens, ducklings, piglets, and calves. She had borne several children, but all except George had been swept away within forty-eight hours by diphtheria, which—before the antitoxin treatment—was the greatest scourge of all diseases known to Californians. Their graves lay upon the top of a hill to the north of the ranch-house enclosed by a fence. The mother had helped to build this fence.

She would visit this tiny cemetery alone, and sit perhaps for an hour, staring across the ocean, wondering vaguely where they might be. But her thoughts for many years had dwelt upon the children who might be coming rather than upon those who had gone. And, long ago, she had decided that Samantha was "just right" for George, fit to be the mother of a dozen Spragges.

"What ails 'em?" she thought.

Always she comforted herself with the reflection that her husband, the late Laban Spragge, had been a slow wooer. Wisely, or otherwise (she was not sure which), Samantha made no effort to accelerate her marriage. Mrs. Spragge waited patiently for what she knew to be inevitable. Samantha was waiting as patiently, with a face as placid as hers, with a shy smile lurking at the corners of a generous mouth.

One day Mrs. Spragge said to the girl:

"You like George first rate?"

Samantha replied demurely:

The Condor's Eyrie

"George is—George."

Mrs. Spragge was quite satisfied. She replied emphatically:

"There's another thing, Samantha, George will always be just George till he dies. He ain't one to change. There's men—your uncle Elihu was that-a-way—whom their own wives can't recognize after a year of matrimony."

"That's so, Auntie."

Nothing more was said. The two women understood each other. Nevertheless, after the capture of the young condor, Mrs. Spragge marked a sparkle in Samantha's eyes and a heightened color upon her round cheeks. The mother listened imperturbably to the girl's account of the climb.

"You was scairt, Samantha?"

"Scairt? Yes."

"Squirmishy feelin' inside?"

"The worst! Them awful birds. I suppose George knew they dassent attack him, because he wasn't scairt."

"Mebbe he was scairt—a tiny mite?"

"He was not," snapped Samantha; the mother smiled.

A few days passed. The young condor, inclined to pine at first, began—as nurses put it—to sit up and take notice as well as nourishment. George pronounced it fit to travel to San Francisco, and thence to Oakland, where it was to be delivered to the famous dealer, Van Horne. George was fully occupied in building a comfortable cage for the monster.

Upon the eve of his departure Mrs. Spragge emerged from her kitchen with a shawl tied over her head. This headgear suggested to her son housecleanings of an ex-

Spragge's Canyon

haustive character. Mrs. Spragge beckoned to him as he stared at her from the shadow of the shed where he was working. She stood in the sun, a splendid, massive figure, and upon her face lay an expression which George tried in vain to interpret. She said solemnly:

"I've a notion to walk a little ways with you."

"Geel!" said George, laying down his hammer.

"To our cemetery," added Mrs. Spragge.

They mounted the hill in silence, side by side. It was significant, perhaps, that the mother led the way by a couple of inches, as if she were pushing on to some definite goal. Just inside the fence was a rude bench. Mrs. Spragge sank upon it with a gasp of relief. George waited till she had recovered her full powers of speech, but, furtively, he took a chew of tobacco, feeling uncomfortably sensible that something was about to happen.

"I want children," said Mrs. Spragge.

For the moment George feared that his mother had gone "plum" crazy. Was she contemplating a second marriage?

"Time you gave me some, Georgie."

"Me?"

"Time you was married, ain't it?"

George laughed, too gaily.

"Quit that," said his mother sharply. "This ain't the place to laugh. I'm serious. Mattermony is serious, but it's got to be tackled by men as is men."

"No hurry, maw," said George easily. He called her "Maw" whenever she addressed him as "Georgie."

"There's an appointed time for everything, my son. My arms are strong enough to hold children, but they're not so strong as they were last year."

The Condor's Eyrie

"The idee's a startler to me."

"You let it soak in. There's nothing in the hull world the matter with you, George, excep' that—you ain't merried, you ain't a father. It's a dooty you owe to yourself, to me, and to Spragge's Canyon. If anything happened to you, whatever would become of this yere ranch?"

"You do have the queerest notions?"

"This notion's bin in my head for some time, but it never bloomed and blossomed, so ter speak, till Samanthy tole me about them birds swoopin' down. It made her and me sick to our stomachs."

"Pshaw!"

"I dreamed las' night of Spragge's Canyon with nary a Spragge in it. That's all, my son."

They descended the hill together.

CHAPTER II

HAZEL

I

SAMANTHA accompanied George when he drove his spring wagon to San Lorenzo, the county town. The road was rough and hilly, seamed with chuck-holes, and covered with fine white dust of penetrating qualities. It meandered along the coast, through hills covered with chaparral and manzanita, the wildest part of the county, as yet unsettled because the soil was so poor and the feed so scanty. Here and there were dotted the board-and-batten houses of Portuguese dairymen, who lived on beans and worked desperately to make a few dollars. In the middle of this wild country lay a splendid rancho, one of the old Spanish grants, now the property of an absentee millionaire. It stretched from the foothills to the sea, league after league of fine grazing land, excellently watered, a principality with everything on it except the prince. George could just remember the old days, when the big adobe house had been filled from garret to cellar with the huge family of the Aguilas. Don Juan Aguila had mortgaged his rolling leagues to the County Bank, and spent the money in dispensing a lavish hospitality. The *señoritas* twanged the guitar and the mandolin from morning till night; *caballeros*, their brothers, ate and drank, and smoked cigarettes, concerned

Hazel

only with the passing hours and the pleasure to be drained from them. When Don Juan was buried in the Catholic cemetery of San Lorenzo, the great rancho was sold. His family disappeared, wiped out of existence by Anglo-Saxon civilization.

Driving past the adobe, Samantha spoke of the old order regretfully. It seemed a terrible thing to her that the Aguilas had been driven from such an earthly paradise. George nodded sympathetically:

"They had to go. Never saved a cent, did old Don Juan! Barbecues and fandangoes all the time! The dollars were burnt up. Father use to tell me that in each guest chamber, at the foot of the bed, there used to stand a table loaded with silver, piles of dollars covered with a cloth. That was the guest silver, never counted, by Gum! And all the squatters stole from 'em."

"The ranch pays now."

"O' course it does. Properly run—no leakage."

"Would you like to run it, George?"

Something in her tone challenged his attention, abnormally sharpened by the study of strange, shy beasts and reptiles. Samantha, he reflected, never asked silly questions.

"Run it! Didn't you know I was asked to run it?"

"Was you. Never told me that."

"I told Maw."

"You'd run it mighty well, George."

"Mebbe. It'd end by runnin' me. I'm quite satisfied with what I hev, Samanthy."

He laughed gaily, lifting his head with an odd characteristic jerk, as if impatient of the trammels of civilization. Certainly, he was extraordinarily handsome; the

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epitome of youth and health and strength. The day was so hot that he wore nothing except his faded blue overalls and a blue flannel shirt. The team had just panted up a steep ascent. George drew rein on the top of the grade, removing his sombrero, letting the breeze from the ocean cool his cheeks. Samantha glanced at his crisp light brown curls and the keen blue eyes shining out of a red-brown face. The color rushed into her own cheeks, but George could not see the blush through a thick, dust-proof veil. He jumped down to see how the young condor was faring in its cage covered by sacking. Beside the cage was a long green box filled with live rattlesnakes, a baker's dozen of them, which George was taking to Van Horne.

"We'll have a snack o' lunch," said George.

He "hitched" his horses to a live oak and fed them. Then he made a small fire. From the back of the wagon Samantha pulled out a paper parcel and two willow spits. In the parcel was some meat. George cut it up, impaled each morsel upon the spits, and began to roast the beef, whistling to himself. When the beef was roasted to a turn George handed one spit to Samantha and took the other himself. They gnawed at the meat, consuming it, under the circumstances, with delicacy and a skill born of much practice. Each had a hunk of bread.

"Nice fresh meat," said George.

He lay upon his back after he had finished, staring through the leaves of the live oak into the stainless blue, inhaling the pungent fragrance of tar-weed with deep breaths of satisfaction. Samantha sat with her back against the trunk, watching the man, wondering whether he would ever be *her* man. She frowned as she marked

Hazel

his blissful expression. He was quite content ; he did not want her. In a minute he would fall asleep.

"George!"

"Gee! You startled me."

"You was dropping off to sleep ; and I've got to go over town and buy things."

"That's so."

They took the road again in silence. But when they reached the turn whence San Lorenzo could be seen in the distance nestling between its twin peaks, George said sharply :

"I'd hate to live in town, Samanthy. The sight o' San Lorenzy makes me lonesome."

"You'd live there happily enough if you had to."

"Not me."

"Folks can live anywheres."

"Some folks, not we Spragges."

An hour later they descended at a modest hotel near the old Mission Church. Samantha disappeared into a dry-goods store ; George paid a solemn visit to the editor of the county paper, and described the capture of the condor. The editor expressed enthusiasm over fresh copy, making notes upon a sheet of foolscap. Of course, he asked the inevitable question :

"Making any stay in town, Mr. Spragge?"

"Skinning out on the cars to-morrer. San Francisco. Back again in three days ; home the day after."

"I'd like to see your place," said the editor. "Pity it isn't a bit nearer town."

"Near enough," grunted George. "So long!"

He walked out of the office, head in air, reflecting that the editor looked peaky-faced. As he strode up the High

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Street he kept on thinking: "How I'd hate to sling ink for a livin'."

Most of the "old timers" greeted the young man with cordiality. They offered drinks, the terrible whiskey of a cow country; George accepted cigars instead. Old Man Munger, who had been a friend of George's father, was on his periodic "bender." He lurched from saloon to saloon, a pitiable spectacle of tipsy age. George escaped from his clutches with difficulty. He could remember the old man when he lived upon his ranch, a fine specimen.

"Damn these towns," he muttered.

II

He reached San Francisco at about four the following afternoon, and crossed to Oakland, where Van Horne kept his animals in a big barn not far from the First Presbyterian Church. Sitting in church, moved by the sonorous voice of the minister, the members of the congregation could hear the roaring of tigers and bears, beasts of Midian prowling in the darkness, waiting to fix their fangs in the plump bodies of the saints. Van Horne welcomed the condor and regretted that there were not more rattlesnakes. He sold the reptiles in pairs to druggists, who exhibited them inside the stores to wondering children and nervous females.

When the business had been satisfactorily done, and the money paid over, Van Horne took George into his house, where a smiling, comely woman received them.

"You'll stay and eat supper, Mr. Spragge?" she said cordially.

"Don't mind if I do," replied George, blissfully uncon-

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scious that invitations to supper are, as a rule, accepted with more carefully chosen words.

Mrs. Van Horne took George's sombrero and glanced at it, with a smile puckering the corners of her mouth.

"You look fine, Mr. Spragge."

Her husband answered.

"He's got a wad of my money in his inside pocket."

"Gee! Didn't I earn it?"

"Guess you did, George. I'll have you and the bird photographed to-morrow morning bright and early. And we'll see the pair of you in a Sunday edition."

George, singularly modest and bashful in the presence of strange women, moved restlessly upon the edge of his chair. Mrs. Van Horne hung up the sombrero and stared critically at George's clothes, obviously the by-product of a cow county. He wore the high-heeled boots at that period so dear to the vaquero, because it was supposed (without any reason) that the high heel prevented the foot of a horseman from slipping through a big stirrup. Above the boots, much turned up, were a air of black pants very baggy at the knee. A black coat vilely cut was tightly buttoned over a flannel shirt. George disdained collars and ties, but he wore loosely tied round his neck a white silk handkerchief.

Mrs. Van Horne murmured softly:

"Photographed—like that?"

It became painfully plain to George that Mrs. Van Horne's expression was not one of high approval. He wriggled even more uneasily, as he said in his clear, treacherous tones:

"Anything wrong?"

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The women of the west, the dwellers in cities, can speak to the point. Mrs. Van Horne answered sharply:

"Yes."

Her keen gray eyes sparkled. She perceived possibilities in the young man opposite. And she yearned to spend some of his hard-earned money upon a blue serge suit, which she decided would suit his style (her word) better than black or gray. Fired by the sympathy beaming from so charming a woman, George rose magnificently to the occasion.

"You go right ahead, Ma'am, and kindly tell me what you suggest."

"Oh! Really, I hardly—I"

"You step right up and in. If I ain't fit to appear in the *Sunday Chronicle* in this yere outfit, you jest say so. If you was me, Ma'am, what would you do?"

"I'd keep that suit for San Lorenzo, Mr. Spragge."

"I was thinking some of getting me another."

"Let me choose it in the city?"

"I'd be obligated," said George. "Anything else?"

"Hair cut and shampoo. Shoes. Collar and tie. New hat."

"Say, I ain't a millionaire."

"You're well fixed, Mr. Spragge; we know that. And you ought to aim to be a credit to Spragge's Canyon."

George brightened.

"If you'll fix me up, I'll be tickled to death, but ther ain't the makings of a dude in me."

"A dude? Hardly."

Van Horne chuckled.

"You leave it to the Madam," he remarked.

Ultimately it was left to the Madam. George became

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a willing but blushing victim to a woman's love of appearance. And the event is recorded, because what happened afterward was largely the consequence of Mrs. Van Horne's taste in men's dress. George, clipped and clean shaven, accurately attired in blue serge, with a becoming tie and brown shoes, presented a remarkable appearance, summarized by the triumphant lady as "It."

"You're It," she said. "Now, you go and show yourself to your best girl."

"I haven't one."

"What?"

"It's so. Never did own one. Busy with other things. Mind never ran that way."

The lady laughed, but her eyes sparkled mischievously.

"You'd better watch out—now."

He was photographed in the new kit, and solemnly congratulated by the photographer.

"Lot o' snap to you, Mr. Spragge."

George tried in vain to dissemble his satisfaction. He stole glances at himself as he walked past the big plate-glass windows; he perceived out of the corner of his eye that the women glanced at him with more than passing curiosity. For the first time in his life he, in his turn, stared at the women, comparing them, noting their points with increasing interest, speculating vaguely in regard to their lives. In his ingenuous mind he divided women into two classes—the good and the bad. The pretty Californians who flitted past him as he walked down Kearney Street puzzled him, inasmuch as they suggested variety. He remembered what his mother had said in the family burial place. Yes, one day, he would have to pick and choose one of these creatures. At this very moment the

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future Mrs. George Spragge was "somewheres." The mere thought became exciting. He felt that the photographer was right in pronouncing him to be a man of snap!

In this exalted mood he met Miss Hazel Goodrich.

III

He had returned to Oakland, where he was staying at a small hotel not far from Van Horne's place, and on his way home found himself next to Miss Goodrich in a cable car. At a glance the young lady leapt to the conclusion that he was very, very different from the young men of Oakland, tooters for the most part of their own penny trumpets, wearers of saucy socks, smarties aggressively eager to air the knowledge which they had too recently acquired at the universities of Berkeley and Stanford. Her curiosity concerning such *beaux* (the old-fashioned word is still used in Oakland) could be glutted in five minutes. Indeed, she had taken a dozen such nicely shampooed scalps before she was twenty-one.

George entered into conversation with her. She pardoned the indiscretion because he was so utterly unconscious of giving offense. Also his eyes were of the exact color of the wild flower known to botanists as *nemophila* and to all children of the West as Babies' Eyes. George said genially:

"You live in Oakland"?

"Yes," she replied, adding demurely: "And you don't."

"Gee! How did you come to guess that?"

"Isn't it written on your face?"

He was charmed by her soft voice, and, above all, by the gay challenge in her tone.

Hazel

"Bad as that is it? Hayseed in my hair?"

"Heaven forbid! Tan on your cheeks, let us say. Ranch near the coast, perhaps."

"If you ain't a rare guesser. Yes, I'm George Spragge, of Spragge's Canyon."

"Of Spragge's Canyon," she repeated.

"San Lorenzo County. Is it O.K. to ask for your name?"

"Possibly not, but I've no objection to telling you. I am Miss Hazel Goodrich."

With impassive assurance, George continued:

"Where do you live?"

"In my own house on Magnolia Avenue."

"By your lonely?"

"An aunt lives with me. I take care of her."

"And who takes care of you?"

She laughed.

"I take care of myself." When George received this in silence, she added demurely: "Don't I look as if I could?"

"No," he replied bluntly.

His glance rested upon a slender, delicately fashioned maiden dressed in quiet gray linen. Beneath a black picture hat glowed a singularly piquant face, too pale of complexion, but illumined by fine hazel eyes encircled by dark lashes and surmounted by dark brows. The head was well set upon a white slender throat. The lips, possibly, were a thought too full, indicating a sensuous and pleasure-loving temperament. The chin, however, was firmly modeled. Perhaps the distinguishing characteristic of this engaging personality lay in an alertness of expression which quite justified the question which George had just

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answered. Miss Goodrich looked very wide awake, well able to take care of herself, at any rate in Oakland. And yet, to her immense surprise, she found herself blushing. To cover her confusion she asked another question:

"What are you doing in Oakland?"

He told her about the condor and its capture. Hazel Goodrich listened with interest and curiosity to a tale soaring to giddy heights. Under her blouse, her heart was beating faster than usual; tiny thrills chased each other up and down her spinal column. He finished abruptly:

"I get off at the next block."

"Oh!" she exclaimed.

Did he read her thoughts? Did he perceive that the tale of his climbings had moved her? He smiled pleasantly as he murmured:

"I'd like mighty well to see you again."

She hesitated, beholding him among the *beaux* aforesaid, ignorant of their little arts and crafts, despised by and despising them! How extraordinarily strong he looked! What an admirable presentment of power in repose!

"I am receiving to-night," she murmured.

"Receiving—what?"

She explained with elaboration. He said derisively:

"I want to see you, not your friends. I'd like first rate to show you my condor. I'm shipping it to New York the day after to-morrow. Then I shall skin out of this."

"In a hurry to get back to Spragge's Canyon?"

He replied promptly:

"Not in quite the hurry I was."

Hazel

The compliment was cheap, but the tone stirred Miss Goodrich to her marrow. And being stirred by anything or anybody was a delightful sensation. She became inspired by a desire to see the condor. The pupils of her eyes dilated as she said shyly:

"I'd love to see your condor."

"Is that so? Nothing easier! Get off here with me."

He stood up. Again she hesitated, and he smiled. The derision of that smile decided her. She "got off." They walked together the length of two streets till they reached Van Horne's place. From the barn came angry roars.

"Gracious," exclaimed Hazel. "Is that your condor?"

Her ignorance served to put George more at his ease.

"You ain't scared?"

"No; but what is it?"

"A Siberian tiger. He travels to New York with my condor. This is Van Horne's barn."

Hazel had heard of Van Horne. She tripped beside George, who walked straight to the shed where the condor sat blinking in his cage.

"He looks sorry for himself," said Hazel. She was wondering why any man could risk his life to capture such an evil beast.

"He does," assented George gloomily; then he added in a livelier tone: "Anyways, I've sold him, and if he don't reach New York alive, he will dead."

Hazel nodded, glancing about her. There was a huge, iron-barred box, now empty, in which the Siberian tiger had traveled across the Pacific. It smelt evilly. Another smell, more offensive, but not so recognizable, assailed Hazel's nose, a musty, pungent odor.

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"Oh! Look!"

She clutched George's arm, remarking, even in that moment of terror, how hard and big it was. Against the wall was a glass tank with a roof to it. Inside the tank were the rattlers which George had brought from the ranch.

"Nice little lot," he said.

"Nice? Ugh!"

She shrank back; the color ebbed from her pretty cheeks.

"Gee! You ain't afraid o' snakes in a tank?"

"I loathe the very sight of them."

She walked out of the shed shuddering. George decided that it would be foolish to tell her that he had caught these reptiles. He followed her, insisting upon seeing her home. As he walked beside her he spoke of the condor's condition.

"Bird did fine on the ranch. Oakland's killing him. I ain't surprised. It would kill me mighty quick."

Hazel had recovered her self-possession. She murmured archly: "I wonder what effect your wild country would have on me?"

"Make a splendid woman of you," said George with conviction. "You're a beaut," he looked hard into her eyes, "but you're high-strung; your nerves are out o' whack."

She denied this with some indignation. George insisted that he was right. The fine air of Spragge's Canyon would blow nervous vapors bang into the Pacific. His womenfolk were strong, you bet! Nothing ever ailed them!

"Womenfolk?" demanded Hazel.

Hazel

"Mother and Samantha."

"Your sister?"

"My cousin."

"Is Samantha very, very different from me?"

"I should say so. She's tough as manzanita, is Samantha! She can run the ranch. Does, too, when I'm away. Wallopin' fine young woman!"

Hazel felt rather piqued. She wondered whether her house would impress this strange young man. It was a handsome house, handsomely furnished. Marble steps led up to the front porch.

"This is my home," she said softly.

Certainly he was impressed and puzzled. The marble steps seemed to astound him. He bent down to touch them, exclaiming:

"I'm a liar if they ain't solid marble. All—yours?"

"All mine. Father was unwisely extravagant about those steps. He used to say that they cost more than the whole house and lot in which we lived before we came to Oakland."

"Cost more than a house and lot?"

"So he said. Will you come in, Mr. Spragge? I should like you to meet my aunt. And you must let me make you some lemonade."

"It's an elegant residence," said George. He watched her as she unlocked a fine mahogany door with a tiny latch-key. Somehow he divined that she desired to impress him. He had swaggered about Spragge's Canyon. He must be very careful not to appear confounded by this city opulence and splendor. He decided that the house was not quite up to the standard of the marble steps.

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In the front parlor Hazel presented him to the good aunt, too amiable and indolent a creature to ask indiscreet questions. If she thought that this stranger was unlike the beaux, she did not say so. Very soon George took his leave, promising to call on the morrow. The bird had become accustomed to accept meat from the hands of its captor. Now, hunched up in its cage, it refused nourishment, glared helplessly at the blue sky glimpsed—no more—through the window just opposite. Van Horne, although he had paid a handsome price for this rare specimen, was philosophical.

"He's a goner," he remarked to George. "Pity, too; but them big birds is H——ll to raise."

George repeated the remark made to Miss Goodrich.

"Did well enough on the ranch."

Profound depression filled his honest heart, a strange emotion for him. He set this down to disappointment about the bird, not being sufficiently self-analytical to take into account the effect of white marble steps upon an unsophisticated Arcadian. Van Horne prescribed a "ball." Mrs. Van Horne administered it. Then George said gloomily:

"You was raised in Oakland, Ma'am?"

"That's right."

"Know many folks?"

"Most of 'em by sight."

"Ever seen Miss Hazel Goodrich?"

"Old man Goodrich's daughter? I know her well. Lives on Magnolia Avenue."

George nodded. Van Horne added emphatically:

"In a high-toned residence a damn sight too big for her."

Hazel

George's eyes brightened, as he murmured: "White marble steps, by Gum!"

"Solid foolishness," said Van Horne. "I knew the old man well. He made considerable money cherry-growing. Then he built that big house with them marble steps. He used to talk o' nothin' else. He wasn't the only fool who invested hard-earned cash in sech trimmings. That house naturally killed him. Now, to-day, them two women have barely enough to live in it."

"Miss Goodrich ain't rich?" hazarded George.

"That's accordin' as you reckon riches, my son. She owns that house and lot, and some town property, stores, and a slice o' water front. She may have two hundred and fifty dollars a month. Not more."

George became himself again. The marble steps seemed to have diminished in size and value. After all, steps between a man and a maid were expressly designed to be mounted.

"Bird can be stuffed," he said pleasantly.

"You bet! Leave all that to me."

"Leaving to-morrow?" asked Mrs. Van Horne.

"I've a notion to stay over for a day or two," replied George. Beneath the little woman's shrewd glance he blushed, but she asked no more questions. When George departed she said to her husband:

"I wonder how George Spragge came to know Hazel Goodrich."

"Ask another, dearie!"

"I will. Would she look at him?"

"Any woman would. Fine young feller, full o' horse sense, too."

"No, he ain't."

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"What in thunder d'ye mean?"

"He ain't got the sense to clear out of his silly old ranch. There'll always be hayseed in his hair, and the smell of tarweed on his clothes."

"George has sense enough to stick to his own job, and make good dollars at it."

"Mighty few of them."

"More'n enough for his wants."

"Not enough for hers, maybe."

And that closed the conversation.

IV

Next day George ascended the marble steps, bringing bad news of the condor. Oakland had killed it. Hazel beguiled him into talking of Spragge's Canyon. Somehow she pictured it as a vast cattle ranch. George had no wish to deceive her, and how could she guess that his home was big to him, the biggest thing on earth? The night before, after the reception, one of the beaux had lingered on to propose marriage. He was an up-to-date young man, Mr. Wilbur P. Stocker, of Stocker's Landing on the Sacramento River. He happened to be a graduate of an Eastern university and the managing director of a prosperous business. As a lover, he was not quite so successful, although the good aunt remarked that Wilbur had never caused his mother a moment's anxiety. Such a son must make an exemplary husband. She added pointedly:

"You've encouraged him, Hazel."

This was true. And, if George had not appeared, the young lady might have said "yes" to Mr. Stocker, partly

Hazel

because she was getting rather tired of saying "no." She told Wilbur that she wanted more time, and it had exasperated her because he acquiesced, treating the affair as a "business" proposition. These were his actual words:

"You take all the time you want, Hazel. There's no hurry about this thing. I think I'll go to Portland tomorrow. My agent up there needs watching. Absence may make your little heart grow fonder."

"Of somebody else," thought Hazel.

Listening to George, she reflected with pleasure that Wilbur was already on his way to Portland, carrying her photograph in his breast pocket. She was aware that he would not look at it too often. He would take for granted that time and distance would make her heart grow fonder. His photograph, handsomely framed, stood upon her writing table. She gazed at it with a mild derision, thinking: "Life will not be madly exciting with Wilbur." An odd craving for excitement possessed her. She wondered what it was like to be passionately in love.

Comparisons between George and Wilbur became inevitable.

George being so indisputably a MAN, Wilbur was visualized as a MACHINE.

These thoughts percolated through her mind, as she listened to George talking about the breaking and biting of colts, the lassoing of wild steers, the extraction of honey from rocks and trees, and the taming, also, of the wilderness, and making it subservient to the wants and needs of the pioneer.

That was it! She swooped upon the truth. George stood out monumentally as the pioneer, a Colossus beloved by all Californians. He was the grandson of a

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real pioneer, a hero who had crossed the plains in a prairie schooner, a conqueror of wild places and wild beasts, and red men wilder than either! The blood of pioneers ran, too, in Hazel's veins. Her maternal grandfather had rounded Cape Horn in the early fifties. It was unhappily true that he had perished with his boots on in a mining camp, having been shot in a drunken brawl, nevertheless the tincture of his wild blood colored redly the Goodrich strain. Grandpa Goodrich had been a Wesleyan minister; his son raised millions of cherries and one daughter!

Presently Hazel found herself saying:

"I should love to see your home, Mr. Spragge."

"Why not? Mother would be ever so pleased to have you. As for me——!"

He paused, quite overcome by his feelings. Hazel murmured demurely:

"What would you do to—to entertain me?"

George answered promptly:

"I'd put some color into your cheeks. Look ye here, if I can fix things with Mother, would you pay us a little visit?"

"I—might."

George's blue eyes sparkled.

CHAPTER III

MRS. SPRAGGE BECOMES UNEASY

I

GEORGE traveled back to San Lorenzo county upon the following day. By this time he had made up his mind that Hazel was the one woman in the world for him. He thought of her as a "daisy," and a "peach," and a "poppy." She became his "honey," and he whistled to himself a popular song, familiar at that time to the native sons of the golden West: "I want yer, ma Honey, yes, I do." You may be sure that he did not think of her as she really was, a town mouse, very sleek, able to perform "parlor" tricks, and hand fed, kept in a fine cage from which, possibly, she was eager to escape.

First and last she was a perfect lady.

He took the ramshackle stage between San Lorenzo and the village of Aguila, sitting beside the driver, Zedekiah Byles, who in his day (long past) had handled six-horse teams and been "held up" by noted bandits. Uncle Zed was a *laudator temporis acti*. Now, in senile decay, he drove a lean pair of ill-groomed "plugs" hitched to an ancient buckboard!

His old age was not, however, garrulous. He had survived a gallant band of men who reckoned talk to be cheap. He despised chin musicians, and pretended to be deaf as well as dumb when he carried drummers.

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But he had an honest affection for George Spragge, believing, with Van Horne, that the young fellow had plenty of horse-sense. He was prepared, also, to hear George roundly abusing city ways and city folk. Whenever George returned from San Francisco the country milk in him seemed to have soured after contact with the rennet of the metropolis. George would expand his mighty chest and inhale the odors of hill and sea, exclaiming: "Old Socks, ain't this fine? Gee! I'm about petered out, sick to my stomach, I am, of city folk. What ails 'em—eh?"

"Everything, by ginger," Uncle Zed would reply. "The railroad played h——ll first; now it's them stinkin' automobiles; to-morrer it'll be flyin' machines. Sick? I'm ashamed o' lingerin' on in such dirty times."

Such talk used to warm their simple hearts.

To Uncle Zed's amazement and disgust. George seemed to have changed. In the first place he was wearing his new blue serge suit. He looked a—dude! He might have been mistaken for a blatant and smug young drummer, bursting with conceit and ignorance. To the stage driver's first query: "Enjoyed yerself up thar?" with scathing scorn upon the "thar," George replied gaily: "First rate."

Mr. Byles said nothing for half an hour, while George hummed to himself "I want you, ma honey, yes, I do." When the old mission town lay well behind them and the road to Aguila long and white in front Uncle Zed growled through his big, grizzled mustache:

"Fixed up, you air! Lady killin' outfit, too, or I'm a liar."

"A lady helped me to fix up, Uncle."

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"I knew it! Messin' about with a city madam! Soft snap you was, I reckon. Picked a lemon, she did."

"I had to have my picture taken with the bird. It's dead, old man."

"I ain't surprised. Died o' grief after seein' you in these yere duds. Nex' thing you'll be tellin' me is that yer married to a city girl."

"Why not?" demanded George boldly. "I ain't going to bach it for ever and ever. San Francisco is full o' pretty girls, the daisiest crowd, and I've sorter fixed it up to bring the daisiest o' the lot down here. See?"

"Yer a blamed fool. I see that plain enough."

George laughed.

"Why shouldn't I pick and choose among the best in the land. I've picked a peach, a perfect lady."

"Is she like yer Maw?"

George said hastily:

"Not exactly."

"I reckon yer maw to be as near perfection as a woman kin be. And I give you credit for pickin' another jest like her, if sech another could be found. I allowed that sech another couldn't be found in any doggoned city. Allers I've mistrusted appearances in womenfolk and horses. Pretty, is she? Whitey face, and a spindlin' figure! Peek-a-boo shirtwaist, I'll bet! Highfalutin' manners and mighty clever and slick as a talker, but a damn fool around a washtub or a stove!"

George laughed again, but he was impressed and perturbed. It occurred to him that his mother might reasonably ask for information in regard to Hazel's domestic qualifications. Suppose that Hazel was a damn fool around a stove? What of it! She was clever enough to

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learn. It would be a privilege for his mother to teach her. He began to be angry with his old friend, saying irritably:

"A girl can be pretty an' good, an' able to take a holt and run a house accordin' to Hoyle!"

"Samanthy is true to that brand."

"Samanthy?"

"I allers thought that Samanthy and you had fixed it up to git married some day. She's just right. Your maw has trained her to be yer wife. We've all known it. It makes me tired that you hadn't the gumption to know it. Now, yer goin' home to break two honest hearts, and you'd like me to say that yer a smart young man. Wal, George, what I think of you I'll jest keep to myself. Also, I couldn't hope to do the subjec' justice. Since I come down to drivin' two instead of six I've lost the gift o' language. But don't you ask me to drive no city madams to Spragge's Canyon."

II

At Aguila George descended from the stage and changed into his old clothes, not forgetting the white silk handkerchief round his neck. Then he borrowed a saddle horse to ride over to the Canyon. As he rode he pondered in his heart what Mr. Byles had said. Before leaving he told the old man that nothing was settled. A young lady might, or might not, come as a visitor to Spragge's Canyon. That was all. Uncle Zed replied tartly, "And quite enough, too," but he had promised to keep his mouth shut. George felt that any gossip about Hazel would be abominable.

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This news about Samantha was upsetting. The more so, because he was sure of its truth. It hit him, as he would have expressed it, bang in the eye! Samantha had been trained by his mother to become his wife. And everybody knew it. This fully accounted for what his mother had said when they stood together by his father's grave.

He felt angry with her because she had not spoken out plainly. If she had——? He answered this question honestly. If she had told all the truth, he, probably, would have stepped into line. The "horse sense" of such a proposition appealed to him.

Now, it was too late. Hazel had risen above his horizon, filling the future with light and sweetness. What a darling! As he approached the homestead his eyes became keener. He swept the skies, looking for turkey buzzards, whose presence might indicate a calf or colt cast in some gulch. The grim scavengers were not in sight.

He drew rein upon the top of the grade which descended sharply into the Canyon. The ranch had doubled in value at the precise moment when it dawned upon him that Hazel liked him, that she might learn to love him, that he, by gum! was man enough to make her love him. The Canyon became sacrosanct because it might be her home.

He flung his right leg over the horn of the saddle, and slid to the ground. Then he tightened the cinch, for a steep path, a short-cut downhill, led to the corral. A reek of blue smoke rose from the kitchen chimney. In the corral were the cows. Samantha was milking. He could see her faded sunbonnet. His mother was cooking

Spragge's Canyon

supper, something extra nice for a tired traveler. George sighed, whistled, and tried to suck comfort from the scenery, so familiar from childhood, but now making a strange appeal to a man about to resume new responsibilities. The sea fog was rolling in from the ocean, driven by the trade wind. The land breeze, which had kept the fog at bay during the day-time, had dropped. The sun, declining into the sea, still shone strongly, extracting subtly the odors of herbs and flowers. Upon the hills the cattle were gazing quietly. The crickets were shrilling in the grass; from the small marsh near the sand dunes at the mouth of the Canyon swelled the chorus of the frogs, singing vespers. And from the northern headland, now hidden by fog, boomed the solemn warning note of a whistling buoy.

Men like George Spragge are not blessed or cursed with too much imagination. This young fellow, to whom pain and sorrow and poverty were strangers, had always accepted his environment as being unalienably his. He had lived joyously and simply in the present, wandering at rare intervals into the past. He had never taken into account the feelings and sensibilities of others, although it must not be inferred that he was selfish or heartless. Hitherto the appearance of his mother and Samantha was not likely to excite anxiety. When neighbors asked the usual question:

"Wal, George, how's the folks?" he could reply with conviction:

"Fine!"

Now the barbed shaft of Uncle Zed Byles had transfixed his honest heart. He groaned aloud when he reflected that Samantha had been trained for him, and

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that he had never known it. Why in thunder couldn't women act as men did? Why play possum?

In this mood, half resentful, half sorrowful, he descended the steep slope and approached the corral. Samantha saw him, but went on milking. Cows must be stripped. George put his horse into the barn, and came back to her. She turned a pink, comely cheek to receive the customary kiss. Squirming inwardly, George saluted his cousin, and asked perfunctorily how she fared. Samantha made the cut-and-dried reply:

"First rate."

"The bird's dead," said George.

"You got your money for him?"

"Yep."

Samantha glanced at her milk pail and approached another cow. George strolled into the kitchen, where the fragrance of beans and bacon greeted him pleasantly. He wondered, however, whether beans and bacon as a regular diet would agree with Hazel Goodrich. And he could not help contrasting his stout mother with the good aunt, an attenuated spinster with small, delicate hands more accustomed to fancy sewing than plain cooking.

He kissed his mother and sat down. Obviously, this was not the moment for full confession, but the ways, so to speak, might be soaped. He said carelessly:

"Had a nice trip."

Mrs. Spragge nodded, as she murmured:

"Mighty glad to get back, I reckon?"

"The bird's dead."

He pulled out of his pocket a much crumpled copy of the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

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"My picture," he remarked, handing it to his mother. Mrs. Spragge wiped her hands and then put on her spectacles. She glanced with pride at the "picture," and then read, very deliberately the short explanatory notice.

"You've bin photographed in a new suit o' clothes, George?"

"Yep. Mrs. Van Horne fixed me up. The photograph from which that was done is bein' framed—for you."

"Got an extra one for Samanthy, my son?"

She looked at him keenly. George was conscious of a blush as he answered hastily:

"Nope."

He divined that his mother was sparring for an opening. They eyed each other contemplatively. The slightly bovine expression of the woman was reflected upon her son's face.

"She kin have mine."

"Why?"

"Oh, because——!"

"Because—what?"

"The child ain't got a picture of you. It would just tickle her to death. Yas, she kin have mine, frame an' all."

"I tell you I got it for you. Ain't you got the first call on it?"

The defiance in his tone was not wasted. Mrs. Spragge went back to her stove in impressive silence.

"What you mean, mother?"

"I think," replied Mrs. Spragge, with conviction, "that you well know what I mean."

George frowned as he left the kitchen, uneasily sensible that home had become of a sudden less sweet, and that

Mrs. Spragge Becomes Uneasy

his mother was a too dominating personality. He wished that he had not changed into his old duds. In the blue serge suit, fortified by white collar and tie, he might have coped more effectively with a situation which exacted urban subtlety and intelligence. He felt singularly cheap as he went back to the barn.

III

In the wilderness meals, as a rule, are consumed rapidly and in silence. Afterward, when the dishes have been washed up and put away, and when the women pick up their sewing, matters of importance are discussed. George was well into his second pipe before Mrs. Spragge and Samantha joined him on the front porch. By this time he was feeling at his ease. Moreover, the short twilight was failing, and soon it would be almost dark. Tell-tale blushes would not then be perceived. He wasted no time beating bushes.

"I met a young lady in Oakland," he began, and then paused. Mrs. Spragge inhaled her breath sharply, a sibilant signal of distress. Samantha bent over her knitting.

"A young lady," repeated Mrs. Spragge calmly.

"Young and pretty—*high-toned*. Miss Hazel Goodrich."

His mother repeated the name, savoring it on her tongue.

"She owns," said George, "an elegant residence on Magnolia Avenue, Oakland. The white marble steps cost more'n this house and barn put together."

"Sakes!" exclaimed Samantha.

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"It surprised me," continued George. "Her father raised cherries, and this one daughter. No sons. Miss Goodrich is well fixed."

"Where did you meet her?" asked the mother.

"On a cable car. It was mighty easy to get acquainted with her. No frills, you understand! Just a perfect lady, finely educated and pretty as a painted wagon!"

Every word, every inflection, sank deep into the minds of those two listeners. Samantha's needles clicked more swiftly. Mrs. Spragge nodded her massive head.

"Pretty, but peaky-faced," continued George. "I showed her my condor, and she asked me to call around. I did so. She lives with her auntie, a spindling old hen not much on the cackle. I talked some about the ranch. Miss Goodrich was kind o' interested. Later, the Van Hornes told me how she was fixed. Day before yesterday I told her," he addressed his mother, "that you'd be mighty well pleased to see her here."

"How did you know that, my son, seein' as the young lady is a stranger to me?"

"Wal, I allowed that you'd jest naturally cotton to her as—as I did. She needs a breath o' fresh air the worst kind. Nerves a bit out o' whack! I'm a liar if she didn't nearly keel over at sight o' my rattlers. I'd like mighty well to have her down here for a spell, if you two feel like it."

Samantha said quickly:

"It's a pretty name—Hazel Goodrich."

"Marble steps!" murmured Mrs. Spragge.

"They cut no ice with her. She makes fun of 'em. She'll be happy as a clam down here. Wal, there it is! I wouldn't bring no young lady here unless it was agree-

Mrs. Spragge Becomes Uneasy

able to you two. It's up to you to say just what you think about it."

"If you've asked her——!"

"I hev'n't—yet. I aim to go back to Oakland to fetch her, if you feel like entertainin' her."

"But you'll do that," said Samantha.

"I'll try. Is it O.K., mother?"

Mrs. Spragge hesitated, but only for an instant. Then she said stiffly:

"We'll do our best, my son. We're rough folks, livin' on a rough ranch. Our ways are not city ways. I fear me Miss Goodrich may find Spragge's Canyon a bit dull."

"Never," affirmed George. "Dull? After Oakland? Not much!"

He burst out laughing. Was there a man, woman, or child in all the wide world who could pronounce Spragge's Canyon dull?

IV

Two days later George mounted the marble steps of the Goodrich residence with beaming face and a heart bursting with hope. His mother and Samantha had been real good—as he expressed it—making things easy instead of hard, each fertile in suggestion concerning the comfort of an unwelcome guest. It is true, none the less, that there had been an understanding between them. Beneath the elder woman's bovine placidity lay a rich vein of common sense, the precious heritage of the wives and daughters of the pioneers. Long after George had gone to sleep, these two faithful creatures sat talking and thinking, and, if there was less talk than sophisticated folk might have reasonably indulged in, the current of

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thought below ran deeper and stronger. Mrs. Spragge broke the ice by remarking solemnly:

"I want her to come, Samantha. We must be extry nice, but——!"

Samantha nodded with a faint smile about the corners of her mouth. Mrs. Spragge continued:

"If she ain't the right kind, dearie, she'll give herself away in little things. It'll be our business to see that she does give herself away, dead away, before him."

Samantha said hesitatingly:

"Maybe she is the right kind."

"Not she."

"But—if she should be?"

"'Tain't possible. Wal, you know what I wish——?"

"Please don't," murmured Samantha.

"Like to like is my motter," said Mrs. Spragge trenchantly. "Never did hold with crossin' breeds. I mind me when George mixed up our dish-faced Berkshires with them Poland China hogs. No good never come o' that. Sakes! what a different world this would be if mothers hed the right to choose their sons' wives."

Samantha sighed. She had reason to know that George possessed a will nearly as strong as his mother's. And love for this unknown quantity was exuding from every pore of his skin. The man who could scale cliffs to capture young condors would surely leap from obstacle to obstacle in pursuit of a perfect lady!

"There's another thing," said Mrs. Spragge, after a lengthy pause, "we don't know as she cares for him. Maybe this means nothing more than a bit of a spree. Wild honey may sour her. Onct I took a notion myself to have a sort o' bust in the city."

Mrs. Spragge Becomes Uneasy

"You?"

"Yes, *me*, child. 'Tis woman's nature to crave most for what ain't easy to git. I was married, too. But Mr. Spragge humored me. He'd sense enough not to laugh at me outside, but inside he must hev been splittin' his sides. Anyways, he allowed that I wanted a change, and he said we'd have a good time in the city. He said if I wanted to waller in pleasure, he'd stand in. We went up by steamer. There wa'n't no railroad. I started in by bein' terr'ble seasick, but I wouldn't let on to him that I wa'n't enjoyin' myself. When we got to the city we let ourselves rip. Mr. Spragge was mighty clever. He made me see everything, and do everything, and eat everything. Gracious! we went to bed foundered every night! At the end o' four days I said I hed enough, but he wouldn't listen to that. He kep' on and on till my head was splittin' and every bone in my body achin'. Finally, I got real mad and I told him I was goin' back home alone."

"He kicked at that, I reckon."

"Not he. I tell you, child, Mr. Spragge was brainy—no common man. He let me think that city life was gittin' a holt of him. He allowed that he'd tasted blood and was thirstin' for more. I dassent leave him alone, so I put in another four days, the awfulest I ever spent in my life. Then we come home together—and stayed there. It's bin mighty sweet ever since."

Again Samantha nodded.

"You think," she murmured tentatively, "that comin' here may work that-a-way with Miss Goodrich?"

"I hope it will," said Mrs. Spragge.

George, of course, ascended the marble steps in bliss—

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ful unconsciousness of these women's wiles. Indeed, he had come to the pleasant conviction that his mother was yearning to embrace Miss Goodrich with a passion nearly as masterful as his own. The spare room was being prepared for his future wife, chickens were penned and being fatted. Roses would be flung before the prettiest feet in California.

Hazel received him calmly.

The young man exclaimed excitedly:

"I've fixed things."

"Fixed things, Mr. Spragge?"

"At the ranch. Mother would like you to come to us first rate, and she hopes you'll stay on as long as you can stick it. There's a saddle-horse for you, a single-footer, and I've bought a new hair mattress for the spare bed. What's the matter with starting out to-morrow?"

"I see; you've been home."

"Wherever else did you think I'd been?"

"I—wondered."

Her eyes softened sweetly, for the dust of travel lay upon the blue serge suit. Obviously, he had gone and returned as swiftly as possible.

"How far is your ranch from the railroad?"

"Twenty miles and more."

"Oh! Thank you!"

"How's that?"

"You have taken a journey of nearly four hundred miles by train, and driven forty miles, to make preparations for a visitor who has not promised to come to you?"

His face fell. Very ruefully he muttered:

Mrs. Spragge Becomes Uneasy

"Thunder and Mars! It ain't possible that you'll let me down by not coming?"

She laughed softly.

"Tell me, please, why you took it for granted that I would come?"

"You said you might! Don't you like me?"

"Ye—es."

"Didn't we cotton to each other at the drop o' the flag? I never did doubt that you would come, provided, o' course, that I could fix things up with the womenfolks. We're going to have a H—, I should say, a star-spangled picnic together. We're a-goin' fishin'; we're a-goin' ridin' into the hills, and you'll get the smell o' tar-weed and sage and wild lilac into your blood. We're a-goin' sailin' in my boat. I'll learn you to steer. Hav'n't you ever wanted to *do* things? Ain't you fed up with frills? Can you breathe deep and good in Oakland?"

Hazel stared hard into his eager face, flushed by health and enthusiasm. Wilbur P. Stocker never talked like this. Once again those enticing little thrills chased each other up and down her spinal column. She answered truthfully, but with an adorable hesitation:

"I don't know that I have ever breathed deep and good."

"I'll learn you to do it. There's a stretch o' bunch-grass in our back pasture, nigh upon a mile in length, a nice, gentle slope. We'll gallop together up that without drawin' rein. At the top o' the slope you can see the ocean stretchin' everlastingly. T'other side lies the Coast Range, and the pines and redwoods. You'll be standin' with me between the mountains and the sea. And you'll

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be breathin' deep and good. And I'll be looking at you; and, by God! you'll be just three times as beautiful as you are now."

His voice trembled and broke. Then she whispered: "I'll come."

CHAPTER IV

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF SPRAGGE'S CANYON

I

AFTERWARD, analyzing the motives which lured her from Oakland, Hazel remembered that she had taken certain things for granted. A ranch, for instance, in a wild cow-country, meant to her an immense tract of land, a pastoral paradise, whereon wandered flocks and herds innumerable. She pictured a substantial adobe house crowning a small hill, park-like land, an orchard and vineyard, barns full of sweet-smelling hay, many corrals—in fine, a patriarchal establishment of peace and plenty.

She found, as we know, the home of a squatter.

George drove her from San Lorenzo to the Canyon. He drove well, with a mastery of his horses which even Hazel could appreciate. But once, during that long drive, she was terrified. Coming down a steep hill with a cliff to the right and a precipice to the left the brake slipped and the buckboard began to move faster than the horses. George said cheerfully:

"Sit tight."

He whipped up his team. Hazel beheld a landscape flashing by, a phantasmagoria of galloping bushes and rocks and trees. She shut her eyes, knowing that she would scream if she kept them open. The buckboard

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seemed to be leaping through space and falling into bottomless abysses. She could hear George's voice, speaking quietly to his horses. She wondered vaguely how he managed to speak so quietly, for he must be terrified, too.

"Nasty turn a-comin'," said George. "You hang on to me."

She obeyed, gripping him desperately. They reached the bottom of the hill with a crash which unhooked a trace and cracked the pole of the wagon. George laughed as he jumped down to look at his gear.

"Close call," he remarked, "but you wasn't scared?"

Hazel laughed. It was on the tip of her tongue to exclaim:

"Why, I was scared to death!"

The expression upon George's face gave her pause. She realized that he was staring at her with an unmistakable look in his eyes, a look that would vanish if she told the truth. To her other beaux she would have confessed honestly, sensible that such a confession from so pretty and fragile a girl would arouse sympathy. Perhaps these more sophisticated specimens of manhood would have laughed to scorn any affirmation of courage, stigmatizing it as swagger. And deep down in her heart was the conviction that this man, so different from the others, did regard her as a weak, feminine creature, one to be protected and loved, but inferior to the male in those essential qualities which are masculine. She glimpsed an immense opportunity of impressing George, and dare we blame her for seizing it? There is a superb *charlantanerie* about some American young women, the

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inordinate desire to appear better and cleverer and stronger than they really are.

She laughed again with genuine mirth.

"You was not scared?" repeated George.

She salved her conscience with an evasive reply——

"Why should I be?" she asked sweetly.

He was enchanted. The subtle compliment to himself percolated to his marrow. He exclaimed enthusiastically:

"Gee! You are a little wonder! And you had sense enough to claw my waist, not my arm. That puts the lid on! Well, we shall be in good shape again in two jiffs."

Hazel watched him at work, admiring his dexterity in repairing without adequate tools the damage wrought by that swift descent. He twisted a whipping of cord about the cracked pole, and readjusted the brake. Then he turned to his passenger.

"Tom Holloway went over that turn with a four-horse team and a load of barley."

"What happened?"

"Three horses killed and the wagon smashed to flinders. Tom jumped. He broke his leg in two places. There's barley sproutin' down there now. You look."

Hazel looked and shuddered. For an instant she had a vision of herself in a casket lined with white satin. Wilbur P. Stocker in *sable*, with face *argent*, and eyes *gules*, was laying white flowers upon the casket. Friends would not be invited to view the "remains," because not more than fifty per cent. had been collected!

"We might both be dead," she murmured.

"Spragges ain't easy killed," said George cheerfully.

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He looked at Hazel, now pink with a diffused sense of gratitude, and said once more:

"Beats me you wasn't scared. Never screamed! Never said a word! Just sat tight and made good! I must tell Zed Byles about this."

"Who is Zed Byles?"

"Uncle Zed used to drive a six-horse stage. He ain't got no use for city Madams. If he'd seen you just now smiling at Death he'd allow that the drinks were on him."

"Would he? Have you been talking to Mr. Byles about me?"

"If you ain't cute——!"

"Have you?"

George was sitting beside her and the horses were slowly ascending an easy grade.

"Yes, I hev."

Hazel frowned.

"Do you talk about me to men like that?"

"I talk about you, and think about you, and dream about you. You're the daisiest girl I ever struck, and I don't care a continental who knows it."

Hazel's laugh was delightful, but she said gravely enough: "I expect you've aroused expectations which won't be satisfied."

George did not reply. At the top of the next hill a fine panoramic view of the Aguila Rancho excited Hazel's enthusiasm. She pointed to the ancient adobe and asked eagerly:

"Is that your house?"

George looked slightly astonished. Obviously Hazel had no sense of distance.

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"Why, we've not come more'n half way yet. That's an old Spanish grant. It belonged to Don Juan Aguila. A rich New Yorker owns it. He asked me to run it. Twenty thousand acres!"

"Why didn't you?"

The sharpness of her tone challenged his attention. Perhaps at that moment he sensed the business instinct, characteristic of Western young women.

He answered slowly: "I hev my own ranch."

"Is it as big as this?"

"Gee! Three hundred and twenty acres. That's all, and quite enough, too."

"Quite a small ranch."

"Big enough for me." As she remained contemplatively silent, he continued: "And I'm my own boss. Hit or miss, that's everything, everything."

Strong feeling lent emphasis to the words. Hazel said gently:

"I suppose a man must do some disagreeable things if he wishes to climb high. I have a friend, Mr. Stocker, of Stocker's Landing. He owns Stocker's Landing, but he's managing director of another big business. He is serving his own interests, which are large, by serving others."

She picked her words daintily, as became a maid who in her time had belonged to a Browning Society, and other associations more or less identified with self-improvement. George listened respectfully, wondering whether her talk would impress his womenfolk as "high-falutin," wondering, also, with profounder interest, whether she was trying to teach him, the Man, how to manage his own affairs. He said crisply:

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"I ain't built that way. Spragge's Canyon lies over thar, beyond that ridge. From the pines you can see *our* house."

Unconsciously his voice softened as the pronoun fell from his lips. Hazel blushed. Did he mean it? Was this son of the soil taking too much for granted? Or—less agreeable thought—did his mother own a half interest in three hundred and twenty acres? George pointed with his whip at the distant ridge, crowned by three pines. Between Hazel and those distant pines lay the most beautiful portion of the Aguila Rancho, rolling pastures rich in feed, well watered by clear creeks, upon whose banks sycamores and cotton-trees spread their shade, sheltering fat beeves beneath their heavy branches. She told herself that she would love to be queen of this lordly rancho, to entertain friends within the ancient *adobe*, to dispense that lavish Spanish hospitality which had become a gracious tradition in this beautiful southern country, this land of perpetual spring. She glanced at the man at her side, "sizing him up," comparing him with the others, keenly conscious of his strength and beauty, noting the thews and sinews of a conqueror. Obviously, he lacked the "push" which distinguished Wilbur P. Stocker, although he could kill poor Wilbur with one hand. Then she heard George's voice close to her ear:

"Say! Are you breathing deep and good?"

Was she? At the words she inhaled the soft, warm air, feeling it penetrating to her very heart with subtle influence and suggestion. Oakland seemed far away, something of a dark blot upon the far horizon. Arcadia

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was greeting her, bidding her welcome, kissing her cheek with its beguiling zephyrs!

"It's perfectly lovely," she admitted.

"Wait till you see the ocean."

She waited in blissful silence. George said nothing to disturb her thoughts. Perhaps he divined some of those thoughts; perhaps he had known how tremendous the appeal of Arcadia may be to the tired dweller in cities. The road, being the property of a millionaire, was free from chuck-holes and reasonably smooth of surface. The horses worked well into their collars. The buckboard traveled swiftly. Hazel closed her eyes as her heart began to beat more quickly. To what was she hastening?

"Look!" exclaimed George.

Triumph informed his tones, the pride of the man of great possessions.

Hazel opened her eyes to behold the majestic ocean. No fog or mist obscured its glory, no wind disturbed its placid surface. The immensity of it, seen from a height, made the girl gasp.

"Nothing between us and Japan," said George, "but blue water. And it's smilin' at you."

She thrilled with his excitement, able for the moment to share and understand it. There is a curious vein of sentiment in men who lead primitive lives, the stronger because rarely, indeed, does it crop to a rough surface. Trappers, miners, fishermen are saturated with a sense of beauty which such men are incapable of expressing in words. Under stress of some overpowering emotion they may, in halting phrase, attempt to convey what they feel, but such attempts end in a stutter and silence. Bet-

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ter so than the too glib periods of the accomplished orator!

"In five minutes," said George, "you'll have your first squint at the Canyon."

She knew then that the Canyon was a bigger thing to him than the Pacific.

II

Mrs. Spragge embraced her when she descended, covered with fine white dust, from the buckboard. Samantha held out her hand. The women took stock of each other as they stood for an instant upon the front porch, while George drove his team to the barn.

"Come right in," said Mrs. Spragge genially. "You're most petered out, I reckon. Ain't them chuck-holes awful?"

It was a shock, even to a young woman born beneath the Stars and Stripes, and ready to affirm, particularly to foreigners, that all Americans are exalted above the odious class distinctions of effete kingdoms and empires. Nevertheless, being young and at the end of a tedious journey, she, so to speak, shut both eyes and plunged gallantly into an adventure, the more exciting because it was other than what she had deemed it to be. She heard her hostess saying: "This is the parlor. We shall eat supper in here, seein' we've comp'ny. The guest-chamber is upstairs."

Hazel smiled sweetly. The three ascended a wooden, narrow staircase, and entered a room which smelt faintly of apples.

"We kep' our Newtowns an' Winter Pearmaines in

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here," explained Mrs. Spragge, "but the smell is nearly gone, and it ain't onpleasant."

"I like it," Hazel declared.

"I do hope, dear, we can make you nice and comfortable."

"I'm sure you can. The Canyon is perfectly lovely."

"It's right pretty and quiet. There ain't a prettier place anywheres in these parts. And the berries are the finest to ripen in the county. You'll taste our honey at supper."

"Do you grow berries to sell?"

"Didn't George tell you that? Yes, we grow berries, and raise chickens and ducks, and colts and calves—a little mite of everything. We make out fine. There's quail and deer, and trout in the creek, and clams on the beach, and a plenty of fish in the ocean. Nobody could want more."

Presently George appeared with Hazel's trunk. He vanished immediately. Mrs. Spragge descended to the kitchen, whence arose savory odors, incense for an honored guest. Samantha remained to help Hazel unpack.

"My!" exclaimed the country girl, "you do have the loveliest things!"

The garments were laid upon the bed. Samantha experienced a pang when she beheld them. She noted, too, how Hazel's delicate fingers hovered about the filmy laces and cambrics.

"You love pretty things?" asked Samantha.

"Oh, yes. Don't you?"

"I've never had 'em," replied Samantha grimly.

"I made most of them."

"You did?"

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"Yes, I sew rather well."

"Your're an expert," said Samantha solemnly. Hazel, for the second time that day, realized that she was appreciated. She guessed that this large, capable, silent young woman could do almost anything with her hands except fine needlework.

"An expert? Oh, no. I could easily teach you."

"Never! Not in a year o' Sundays. And if I owned this," she held up a nightgown, "I'd put it away and look at it sometimes, mebbe. I couldn't wear it."

Hazel was amused.

"Why not? I'd like to give you that nightie. Take it, and wear it to-night."

"You're mighty kind, but I can't accept it. 'Twould make everything I've got look cheap and common."

"What nonsense!"

"It's how I feel."

Slowly the two girls looked at each other, trying to peer beneath the surface. Hazel beheld what she had expected to find, the country cousin, a thought more comely than was quite agreeable, but otherwise negligible as a rival. Samantha beheld the "city girl," trained in all the arts that please men, armed cap-à-pie for conquest. And she had conquered—irresistible charmer! Valiantly Samantha faced the inevitable, telling herself that the victory was already won by this dainty, smiling girl, so sure of herself, so convinced in her own mind that Miss Hazel Goodrich was exactly "right."

Hazel, accustomed to having her own way, refused to take Samantha seriously:

"You must wear it—to please me. I'm sure we're going to be good friends."

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She held out the garment, twisting a small knot of baby-ribbon into place.

"No," said Samantha, with finality.

III

Alone in her own room Samantha peered into a small glass which hung above the washstand. What she saw failed to please, for she muttered savagely:

"Hayseed!"

She sat down upon the edge of the bed, folding her hands upon her lap. Objects familiar from childhood exercised a soothing influence. This small room, bare of luxuries, was the girl's sanctuary. In it, particularly at night, she became herself; she achieved detachment from Mrs. Spragge and her masterful son. And, very rarely, there occurred illuminating moments when she got outside her workaday self. At such times she could see this normal self with almost uncanny clearness; she became the derisive judge and critic, the looker-on who marks every move in the game.

Such a moment came now, when she was about to make her simple preparations for the evening meal. In the top drawer of the bureau lay a new shirtwaist carefully designed to find favor in George's sight. Beneath it was a clean white skirt and a somewhat skimpy sash of cheap ribbon. At the bottom of the drawer were underthings, stout and serviceable, so stout indeed that they could defy a hurricane when pinned upon a clothesline. The ordinary trade wind, so Samantha reflected, would work havoc with Hazel's flimsy cambrics.

She rose from the bed, frowning, pulled open the

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drawer and took from it her best things, eyeing them with superlative derision. One can imagine the same derision upon the face of the President of a South American republic when he returns to his obsolete cruiser, the pride of a tiny navy, after a visit to some modern battleship.

Samantha held up the shirtwaist, noting its cut and the edging of cheap lace upon the short sleeves.

"You silly idiot," she murmured.

Then she washed her hands, tidied her hair, and went downstairs, walking into the kitchen with her chin cocked at a defiant angle. Mrs. Spragge glanced at her.

"Ain't you going to fix up any?" asked the elder woman.

"No."

"She's pretty, Samanthu, and nice-mannered, and—I may as well say it—I can't help likin' her."

"Nor can I," said Samantha. She continued deliberately: "That's what she was made for—to be liked and made much of. And as clever with her needle as with her tongue."

Mrs. Spragge nodded, but she said dolorously:

"When I seen her, I said to myself—it might hev been worse."

At supper Hazel sparkled. George, of course, told the tale of that close call.

"She made good," he repeated half a dozen times. And this repetition produced its effect. Hazel perceived that Mrs. Spragge and Samantha were visibly impressed. She grasped the fact that courage is the king-virtue of those who dwell in the wilderness. Hitherto such knowledge had come to her at second hand, gleaned from news-

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papers and books. Also, she had wit enough to deepen a fine impression by affecting to make light of it. She silenced George with an uplifted hand, the prettiest hand ever seen in Spragge's Canyon.

"You mustn't say another word," she commanded. "Already I can feel my head swelling."

Another surprise awaited Mrs. Spragge and Samantha. Hazel praised the cooking with discrimination and knowledge. Whereupon Mrs. Spragge remarked incredulously:

"Why, child, you can't cook?"

"Yes, I can," she displayed a dimple, "I won the first prize at a chafing-dish competition. I can make all sorts of delicious things. You must let me show you what I can do with your clams."

"Well, I'm jiggered," said George. "Next thing you'll be telling us is that you can wash clothes."

"I can do fancy laundry work. I get up my own best things."

George chuckled. Uncle Zed Byles must be told this. Uncle Zed would have to set up the drinks—*sure!* Uncle Zed would have to haul down his flag. Hazel asked demurely:

"Really and truly, do you value his opinion?"

"He could handle a six-horse team better'n any man on the road."

"I see."

But she didn't. Her vision of George had become blurred. Looking at him across a narrow table was like examining an impressionist picture too close to the eyes. But this inability to see the man clearly merely whetted her interest and curiosity. And the purely physical attraction grew stronger. He seemed to be handsomer,

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bigger, more alert in his own setting. The uncomfortable thought obtruded itself that, inasmuch as he bulked so large in his own home, he would necessarily shrink into smaller proportions anywhere else.

All in all the first evening was a success.

IV

She slept soundly, tired after a long journey, but woke early, being disturbed by the others. She slipped out of bed, put on a dressing-gown, and sat down by the open window. Below, she could hear Mrs. Spragge moving about the kitchen, the pine boards creaking beneath her heavy weight; Samantha was milking; George had plenty to do in and about the barn. And it had been agreed that her breakfast would not be served till eight o'clock.

Hazel leaned her head upon her hand and looked out of the window. She could see down the Canyon and follow the course of the creek till it reached the sand dunes which fringed the ocean. It babbled joyously as it escaped from a small dam just above the berry patch, becoming silent when it reached the tail of the rapid, where there was a large pool. Suddenly, George appeared in jumper and overalls, bareheaded, with sleeves rolled high above the elbow. Hazel was about to greet him, when she remarked something furtive about his movements. He went a tip-toe toward the creek, hiding himself behind the reeds and bushes. Then he dropped to the ground, and began to wriggle noiselessly through the grass. For a moment she lost sight of him. But, presently, his curly head appeared. He seemed to be

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staring into the creek, with his eyes close to the water. He lay motionless. Then there was a quick movement, a triumphant laugh, and George sprang to his feet. Something glittered in his hand.

"What is it?" cried Hazel.

He looked up to behold her charming face framed between two big plaits of hair.

"A nice fat trout for your breakfast."

He held it up, still wriggling.

"How ever did you catch it?"

Before replying he killed the fish by knocking its head against the heel of his boot. Hazel winced, unaccustomed to seeing things killed. George approached. There were drops of water upon his massive forearm which sparkled in the sunlight.

"I tickled it. Sleep well?"

"Fine. How did you tickle it?"

He explained the procedure at some length. Hazel grasped the essential principle. The tickler must know the exact habitation of the trout who lies with nose and eyes upstream. The hand must glide into the water behind the fish without making a ripple. The tips of the fingers must slip along the belly of the trout. And *then* it must be grasped firmly behind the gills.

"Gracious! Could I do it?"

George looked doubtful, but he rose to the opportunity of paying a matutinal compliment.

"I believe you could do most anything, but ticklin' trout needs a lot o' practice. I've been at it since I was five years old. I'll take this in to mother. But I'll come back. I've got to pick some fresh berries for you."

Hazel remained at the window, absorbing deliciously

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the odors of the garden, hearing the hens clucking and the sibilant hiss of milk streaming from full udders. The skies were cloudless, and the delicately poised leaves of the cottonwoods hung motionless, waiting for the land breeze, their constant lover. A cock quail began to call from the chaparral.

"Kah-kah-kah-a-o!"

There was an answering call from a gulch behind the house, and then another and another. And everywhere the bees seemed to be humming. Hazel saw a long row of hives at the end of the berry patch. Presently, her ear began to register other and less familiar sounds. A distant roaring, with odd intermittencies of silence, challenged her attention. She decided that this roaring was caused by the breaking of big combers upon rocks. The roaring died away more melodiously to the left. Again she leapt to the right conclusion. The combers lower down were breaking upon stretches of wet, brown sand.

During the intermittencies of silence she could just hear the mournful mewing of the gulls; and her eyes could detect the flash of their white wings as they flew over the marsh.

She smiled happily.

The change enchanted her. This, so she told herself, was the real Arcadia, *le pays du tendre*, so different from the sham country about Oakland, a country divided by barb-wire fences and defaced by gerry-built villas surrounded by smug gardens. It was quite delightful to reflect that she was twenty miles from a railroad.

George appeared with a basket, which he lined with leaves from the vine clambering over the porch. He began to pick strawberries, selecting the largest and ripest,

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a pleasant labor of love. His mistress looked on approvingly, sensible of an amazing exhilaration, a positive tingling of the pulses. From time to time George looked at her to make some ingenuous remark.

"Gee! You have a pretty color."

Wilbur P. Stocker would have embarked upon a lengthy conversation, beginning and ending with an expression of his personal views. Had he stretched himself at full length upon the grass, a keen eye might have detected the thinning of his hair upon the back of his head. Wilbur was accounted "brainy." Twice Hazel had visited Stocker's Landing upon the Sacramento. She knew what the wharf had cost, and the number of big warehouses belonging to Wilbur. The works of man, the pushing, resourceful American MAN, interested him infinitely more than the works of God. Perhaps his God was Man. The thought had not occurred to Hazel before, and she dwelt upon it with derisive humor, trying to picture Wilbur at work in Spragge's Canyon, directing his men to cut down trees and clear the slopes of chaparral.

"Feel homesick?" shouted George.

"Not a bit."

"Sure?"

"Quite."

He filled his basket and disappeared, somewhat to Hazel's annoyance. His curt remarks punctuated agreeably her own thoughts. Also, she liked to look down upon him as he worked for her, gathering the fruit of his own soil for her, obviously possessed and obsessed by her.

"I am the very first," she thought.

CHAPTER V

SURF FISHING

I

HAZEL ate breakfast alone upon the front porch. Samantha waited upon her. The cloth was of coarse texture, spotlessly white; the coffee had not come from Mocha or Java, but it had been freshly browned and ground that morning. The trout was cooked to perfection. The thick yellow cream, the honey, the crimson berries, and the rose laid by her plate were oblations appealing irresistibly to the mind rather than the senses.

"I could have breakfasted with you," said Hazel.

"Oh, no."

"Why not?"

Samantha stood still, looking down upon the visitor.

"You are different," she said shortly. Without waiting for a reply she left the porch.

"Am I different?" thought Hazel.

Unable to answer the question satisfactorily, she attacked her trout with appetite. A sense of well-being pervaded mind and body, a restfulness which she hesitated to disturb. Her fancy hovered above these good, kind people and for the moment a butterfly glimpse sufficed.

Inside the house George was moving about his room. Presently he came out and she heard the click of a turn-

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ing key. Vaguely she wondered why he locked the door of his room. When he appeared carrying two fishing-rod and other fishing gear she asked him:

"Why do you lock up your room?"

He laughed genially at her curiosity.

"Nobody goes into my room."

"Nobody?"

"Except me. The women would want to fix things in shape to suit them. Besides——"

"Yes?"

"I hev other reasons." With a quick change of tone he went on: "We're a-going surf fishing. Tide's just right. Will you be ready in half an hour?"

"Why, yes."

"I'm off to get some bait—mussels. Samantha will take you down the Canyon. The rock from which we fish is just at the mouth of the creek where it joins the sea."

He strode off, whistling.

Hazel finished her breakfast, hoping that Samantha would come back to talk to her. It occurred to her that the Spragges were not talkers. Instead, they did things. When she rose from the table she could not help peering into George's room. The one window looked upon the porch, but it was shut. Through dirty panes of glass Hazel could see the den of primal man. Here, evidently, he kept the weapons of the chase, and some of its trophies hung upon the walls. Upon the dusty floor were many boxes. The rude furnishings included a redwood table, a couple of chairs, and an old-fashioned bureau. In all there might have been half a dozen books, and many old newspapers. In a corner lay a heap of stones, samples of different ores. George had told her that there

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were gold and silver and copper in the foothills, but not in sufficient quantities to make mining worth while. He had spoken also of a richer deposit of bituminous rock, indicating the presence somewhere of oil. When she had asked him if he had ever thought of developing these sources of wealth George replied carelessly: "It means puttin' dollars into the ground, more'n you kin take out."

Upon the rough table were jars and bottles and cages which might hold small birds or mice.

"A messy place," thought Hazel.

Half an hour later Samantha and she took the path down the Canyon, following the curves of the stream till they reached the marshes, where the lively creek became a sluggish slough, bordered by *tules*, the reeds beloved by the mallard and teal. The duck flew over them, quack-ing loudly. Snipe rose at their feet. It was a paradise and sanctuary of wild birds.

They reached the low sand dunes. Samantha picked up her canvas skirt and waded through the soft white sand, lifting her feet high at each step. Hazel trod in her tracks, but her shoes filled with sand. She marveled at the freedom of Samantha's movements.

"There's George," said Samantha.

From the top of the dune Hazel could see a fine expanse of wet sand reflecting the cloudless blue of the skies. A brilliant, shifting, scintillating white riband bordered this where the great combers broke into foam. Beyond lay the ocean.

George stood upon a rock waving his hand to the girls. His overalls were rolled up high above the knee, displaying a magnificent pair of legs. His great arms were bare

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also. Hazel thrilled as she looked at him. What a man he was! What a picture he made!

"I'll scoot home," said Samantha.

She "scooted" swiftly and silently, as if she were glad to go. Hazel walked toward George.

"Come on," he shouted; "no time to lose."

She stood still, staring at the water between them.

"Take off your shoes and stockings. Hold up your skirts good and high!"

Hazel obeyed, blushing, and angry with herself because she blushed. George, with a delicacy which surprised her, turned his broad back upon her. In a couple of minutes she stood beside him.

"Shall I put on my shoes again?" she asked. "My! These rocks are sharp!"

George stared at her small, pink feet. From one little toe a tiny stream of blood was trickling.

"It's this way," he explained. "The tide's coming in. It's on the turn. The fish come with it. In half an hour it will be breaking over the rocks. That's when the fishing is real good. But the salt water will spoil your pretty shoes; and the shellfish will cut your pretty feet to bits. I'm the worst kind of an idiot not to have thought o' that. Samantha, too. She ought to hev remembered."

"I could slip on my stockings."

"You'd be through 'em in two twos. No; I'll fix you. Sit right down."

He spread his coat upon a smooth rock. Hazel sat down, beginning to enjoy the adventure, although her feet were sore. George opened a clasp knife and began to rip at the sleeve of his shirt.

"Whatever are you doing?"

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"Rippin' off these sleeves."

He did so deftly, leaving his arms bare to the shoulder. The great deltoid muscles fascinated Hazel; and the skin above them was as white and smooth as her own. George knelt down and took one of her feet in his hand. She wondered whether he would attempt a compliment. She imagined what Wilbur would say. He might venture to squeeze so pretty a foot. George took no such liberties. He began to bind the flannel sleeve about her foot, securing it with whipcord. His head was at her knee. Once he looked up, smiling. The color of the sea glowed in his eyes; the foam was no whiter than his teeth. But obviously he was engrossed with his task, and proud of his resource.

"Not a bad idee, eh?"

"Not at all," said Hazel demurely. "I can sew the sleeves on again."

"Not much."

She understood that they were to be preserved.

"Now," said George, "I'll take everything ashore that we don't want. He seized his coat, stuffing her shoes and stockings into the pockets of it.

"Take off your jacket," he commanded.

Hazel obeyed.

"Roll up your sleeves, and tie up your skirt with this bit o' cord. Then we'll get to work."

He waded ashore and returned. Hazel's sunbonnet hid a much flushed face. She was certain that she presented an amazing and hardly decent appearance, but George expressed satisfaction.

"You look—bully!"

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The fishing began. George instructed Hazel how to cast the bait into the surf. Suddenly she felt a tug——

"I've got one—I've got one!"

She was screaming with excitement.

"Hold up your pole, let him run! That's good. Now, wind in slowly."

Fortunately, this first fish was well hooked, and the line held. Nevertheless George was so terrified of losing it that he leapt into the surf nearly up to his waist. He emerged dripping with a glittering two-pounder. Had he proposed marriage then and there Hazel would have accepted him. Mere thanks seemed fatuously inadequate. She wanted to kiss him.

"How heavenly!" she exclaimed, rapturously.

Soon the fun became even more exciting. Hazel had to land her own fish, George being fully occupied with a monster at the end of his line. The lines fouled, and both fish escaped. George swore freely:

"Mister Spragge . . . !"

"Gosh," said George, crimson with confusion, "I forgot. Awful break, too! I'm a liar if I could help it! Thought for the minute you was Samantha."

Hazel said severely:

"Do you swear like that before Samantha?"

"Mother and she air used to it."

"I should never get used to it."

"That's quite right. When you're around I'll swear to myself, even if I bust."

He bent down to disentangle the lines. Hazel's heart melted. Certainly, he was the handsomest man she had ever seen. She murmured softly:

"Mr. Spragge?"

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"You might call me George."

"Well, then—George. Won't you give up swearing, if I ask you?"

George shook his head.

"I'd just love to oblige you, but I jest naturally couldn't. Cuss words make ranch life easy. I couldn't get through plowin' without 'em. Samantha can swear some at our red cow. There's times when she won't let down her milk without it."

Hazel burst out laughing.

II

They caught a lot of surf fish; and Hazel enjoyed herself mightily. The sun kissed her cheeks, tinting them with pink; the soft breezes curled the tendrils of hair which escaped from the sunbonnet; the salt spray from the combers made her eyes smart and then sparkle. She became wet to the skin, and didn't care, for the joy of living was intoxicating her, the lure of the wild, that elusive will-o'-the-wisp, shone upon land and sea. The gulls flying above her head seemed to be calling to her with beguiling invocation. They swooped closer and closer.

"Want to look at you," said George.

"They're after our fish," Hazel replied.

The fish lay in a big basket. George covered them with wet kelp. When the basket was nearly full he said:

"Time to quit."

Hazel looked landward, and uttered a sharp exclamation:

"I can't ever wade through that."

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She pointed a finger at the water between the rock and the beach.

"Oh, yes," said George. "You'll get a bit wet, but Samantha goes into the dunes and dries her things on the hot sand."

"I shall be knocked over by the waves."

George said eagerly:

"I'll carry you."

After some protest, Hazel resigned herself to his arms. He picked her up as if she were a baby, holding her breast-high, and waded into the water, deepest, of course, close to the rock. She lay passive, closing her eyes, enjoying this new experience.

He set her down gently, and laughed.

"Why didn't you put me down when the water grew more shallow?"

"Never thought o' that."

He returned to the rock to fetch the fish and the gear. Hazel vanished into the dunes. When she reappeared she had put on her shoes and stockings and her jacket. She looked neat and trim. And she had regained her self-possession. She felt able, on land, to cope with this strong, masterful man, and to subdue him after her own fashion, so different from his.

George was digging for clams. It had been arranged that Mrs. Spragge and Samantha should come down to the beach at noon, carrying with them a large stew pan, and the wherewithal to make a chowder. George began to talk about clams.

"Clam beaches are gettin' worked out. Nobody knows that clams can be dug here at half tide. I peddle clams in August when the campers from the interior come to

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the other beaches. They might camp here, if they knew what I know."

"You don't want the campers to come?"

"Not much!"

She smiled faintly.

"Don't you get tired of seeing the same faces day after day?"

"Nope! Do you think that I could ever get tired of seeing your face?"

Once more she became furious with herself because she blushed.

III

Mrs. Spragge compounded an admirable chowder; and some of the smaller clams were baked in kelp. Samantha made the coffee. Hazel watched the women attentively, noting their deftness over a camp-fire, and an ability to make simple objects serve their ends. She noticed, too, that George never offered to help. He lay upon his back on the warm sand, basking.

"You lazy thing!" said Hazel.

Mrs. Spragge said emphatically:

"My George ain't got a lazy bone in his body."

"I was only joking, Mrs. Spragge."

"He dug the clams."

Hazel fancied that she spoke with meaning. George, she understood, would work hard at his job, that of universal provider, and his wife, when he married, must work as hard in the kitchen, at the wash-tub, and around the house. Such apportionment of labor was inevitable in the wilderness. The red man hunted and his squaw

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cooked the venison. Mrs. Spragge, bending over the camp-fire, with the smoke curling about her brown face, reminded Hazel of a sturdy squaw; and George smacked of the Indian chief in repose, as he lay watching the women, a noble red man!

Hazel unpacked the bread and butter and the crackers. There was nothing else for her to do. There were four basins. The chowder was ladled into these and Mrs. Spragge said in a fervent tone:

"May the Lord make us truly thankful."

"I am truly thankful," said Hazel.

Then they ate in silence. And thus ended a memorable morning.

IV

During the afternoon George was busy, leaving Hazel with the women. They took their sewing on to the front porch. Hazel could hear George moving about his den, and presently he came out carrying an empty gunny-sack and a stick with a fork at the end of it.

"Where are you going?" asked Hazel.

"Into the chaparral?" he replied curtly.

"What for?"

He laughed, making no reply. Hazel looked cross, as he strode away, not even glancing back. Mrs. Spragge said slowly:

"He locates wild bees and finds out the haunts of the deer. He's interested, is George, in all beasts and birds and, and—everything."

Her deep, drawling tones, the voice of one at peace with her world, affected Hazel curiously. Once more

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she wondered whether she would grow like these two women, whether the wilderness would enslave her, as it had enslaved them, whether she would hug, as they did, the chains which bound them to a life so tranquil, so purged of care and excitement and pain. She stole a furtive glance at Samantha, who was hemming a sheet. In Oakland, whenever women met together to sew, their tongues moved more swiftly than their needles. These two worked in silence. Hazel decided that Samantha was rather attractive, after all. Her graces, such as they were, lay beneath the surface. They manifested themselves shyly, peeping out unexpectedly. Her voice, for instance, was charming, with arresting inflections. Her movements, her rare gestures, were satisfying. Hazel had studied Delsartean methods. She had trained herself to hold a cup of tea, to pick up a book or a flower, to sink into a chair, or enter a room after a certain fashion considered by connoisseurs to be extremely elegant. Samantha's methods, in sharp contrast, were absolutely natural, distinguished by a directness of purpose wholly admirable because so obviously free from pose. It struck Hazel that Eve, in the Garden of Eden, must have moved as Samantha moved.

Then she felt a mischievous desire to stir up these placid creatures, to inject into the slow moving current of their blood some of the restlessness and uncertainty which tingled in her.

"Is it always like this?" she asked softly.

Samantha waited for the elder woman to reply. Mrs. Spragge, chewing the cud of other reflections, looked up inquiringly:

"Like what, my dear?"

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"Is it always summer?"

George's mother replied literally:

"Perfessor Bungard, who teaches school in Aguila, calculates that we hev about three hundred an' ten days outer the year like this."

Hazel had to explain what she meant. Mrs. Spragge nodded, staring intently at her guest. Her voice, when she spoke, had a curious hardness, a defiance almost, as if she held her questioner in contempt.

"It ain't always like this. In the dry years I've seen the cattle and horses dead beside the dried-up creeks and springs; I've seen the diphtery rage through our county, and the children died like the cattle and horses—dropped in their tracks. Four of mine were taken. They lie on the top of the hill, just beyond the corral. I've seen men shot down. There was a gang o' train robbers who terrorized the hull state. The sheriff and his posse ran 'em to ground not three miles from this house. *They was wiped out.* Them as wan't shot was lynched that very night. The sheriff had 'em all in our barn. Judge Lynch held up the sheriff. The bandits were taken out at midnight, taken to the bridge over which you passed to-day. There were three grown men and a boy o' seventeen. And a rope for each. They stood in a row in the moonlight with the nooses around their necks, and the drop into the creek below. They didn't whine any. They was up against it, and they knew it, but the three men swore that the boy was innercent. . . ."

Mrs. Spragge paused. Her massive face seemed to have grown harder, like her voice. Hazel exclaimed eagerly:

"They let the boy go!"

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"No; he was the son o' the ringleader, the worst o' the gang. They pushed him off the bridge first."

"Oh!"

"They was right to wipe out the hull brood."

"Were you there?" asked Hazel breathlessly. George's mother had spoken with convincing simplicity, the simplicity of the eye-witness.

"I was not thar. Lynching is men's work. My husband was thar, and next day I saw the four bodies hangin' from the bridge. They was cut down and brought here."

"Here?"

"To this very porch. The boy lay jest where you're a-sittin'."

Hazel shuddered. A vague fear possessed her. Mrs. Spragge and Samantha remained placid.

"How awful!"

"Wal, it's summer the most o' the time, but not always, not always."

She went on with her sewing.

V

George came back from the chaparral in time to do chores before supper. He passed Hazel with a genial word of greeting:

"Made out all right?"

"Oh, yes. And you?"

"Fair to middlin'."

"What have you got in that sack?"

He laughed derisively:

"Gee! We're a mite curious, ain't we?"

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"Not at all."

"Pardon! I thought you was. I've got bread and butter in this gunny-sack. It don't run to more'n that."

He disappeared, whistling, into his den, slamming the door behind him. Presently, he came out, still whistling, and went to the barn. Hazel rose to her feet, glancing furtively about her. Mrs. Spragge was in the kitchen; Samantha was milking. A blue jay, with its head on one side, eyed Hazel. When she moved toward the front door, the bird screamed and flew away.

"What an ugly, discordant note!" reflected Hazel.

This reflection became more acute as she crossed the threshold of the house. The beauty of the jay's plumage had captivated her eyes, the harsh scream offended her ears. She connected it with the story of the lynching. She could see quite plainly the wooden bridge, the white dunes, the gray-green hill to the left, and the mighty ocean to the right. That morning, she had thought the scene idyllic; now, as the shadows were lengthening across the landscape, she could see four figures dangling above the babbling, bubbling creek, four dead bodies—three grown men and a boy!—laid out upon the floor of the porch.

Entering the house, Hazel glanced at the kitchen door. It was shut. Sounds of sizzling fat indicated Mrs. Spragge to be at work with her favorite tool, a frying pan. Hazel hesitated. The key of George's room remained in the lock. Hazel touched the handle of the door, grasped it, and silently turned it. The door opened. Upon the floor, near the table, was a green box. It was not unlike the Wells, Fargo boxes which are used to hold gold and other valuables. Was George engaged in some

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illicit calling? She had a startling vision of him, pistol in hand and masked, holding up some stagecoach.

And then, suddenly, curiosity assailed a sense other than that of sight. Hazel smelt a pungent, offensive odor, an acrid musty stench, not quite unfamiliar, but one that defied classification. She closed the door, and ran upstairs to her own room, so as to escape swiftly from this pervasive, indescribable smell. None the less, safe in her room, she regretted this premature haste, for surely, after George's rudeness in evading her questions, she would have been justified in making a more exhaustive examination of the green box. Why did George have secrets from the girl he liked, from the girl he—*loved*? When he picked her up, crushing her against his great chest, she had read love in his blue eyes; and she had felt his heart throbbing fiercely for her. The realization of this passion was thrilling. And now, curiosity produced other thrills, almost as exciting.

What was in the green box?

CHAPTER VI

LOST

I

NEXT morning, George and Hazel rode into the hills. The "single-footer" provided for the young lady happened to be an aged and well-mannered quadrupe, but it inspired valiantly suppressed qualms in Hazel. George said anxiously: "Scairt?" She replied: "Not at all." He smiled incredulously, so Hazel thought, and eyed her seat in the saddle. Hazel murmured:

"I haven't been on a horse for ever so long."

They walked uphill, till they came to the tiny cemetery.

"Father's there," said George, "three sisters and a brother."

"Your mother told me about the diphtheria—all four taken at once."

"Twas mighty tough on Mother. She jest naturally loves children. I reckon that's woman's nature."

"Not invariably," said Hazel, reading his thought. She feared that he might propose marriage there and then, the old formula: "Will my bones lie with your bones?" In a low voice, she continued: "This is a very sad spot; and it's such a heavenly morning. Shall we ride on?"

George nodded, leading the way into the brush, along a narrow path bordered by manzanita and wild lilac. The

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path wound up and up to a small summit, whence a fine view of the ranch revealed itself. George stood still, staring into the blue, shading his eyes with a broad hand.

"What are you looking at?" asked Hazel.

He replied grimly:

"Turkey buzzards. One o' my colts is cast in a gulch, or a calf is dying. They know. They're always on hand. Say—we must find out what's wrong, hunt out the trouble. I hate to spoil our ride, but mebbe there's life to be saved."

Hazel replied amiably:

"I shall love to help. My eyesight is fine."

She peered down into the Canyon, seamed with gulches, washed out of the hills by terrific rains. But George kept his eyes upon the buzzards. He could see three of them.

"The trouble's over thar."

He pointed to a rocky gorge about half a mile distant.

"Will you wait here?" he asked.

"Can't I come with you?"

"'Twill be rough travelin'."

Something in his glance arrested her attention. Was he sizing her up as a fair-weather companion, seeking pleasure along the lines of least resistance?

"I want to go with you."

"Good!"

He plunged into thicker brush. Hazel followed. The tough manzanita boughs whipped her cheeks; her horse stumbled and slid down the steep descent; the heat was tremendous.

Lost

"How lovely!" she exclaimed, as they came out of the brush into an enchanting glade.

A great live oak spread immense branches over some turf still green. A spring gushed out of the hill, and flowed into and over some troughs. Below was a tiny meadow in which cattle were grazing. White oaks, sycamores and cottonwoods stood out against the sage-green background of the hills. A buck bounded into the chaparral.

"Fat venison," said George.

"Oh! I should love to taste venison."

"You shall."

He crossed the glade, followed by Hazel. She would have liked to rest by the spring, but she perceived that George was eager to push on. He said frowningly:

"The beast is nearly dead. There are five buzzards now."

"Hateful birds!"

"That's all right. They save us the job of buryin' the carcasses."

They traversed more brush, plunged down other slopes, and finally emerged at the bottom of the gorge, an ancient river-bed, arid now, save for the prickly pear cactus, and strewn with huge boulders. A geologist would have found evidence of a Titanic struggle between earth and fire and water.

"Damn!" said George savagely.

Close against a rock, still standing, but apparently in the throes of dissolution, leaned a colt. For the moment Hazel did not recognize it as such, for the animal's head was swollen to a monstrous size. It looked like a pony with the head of a hippopotamus.

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"What ails it?" asked Hazel.

"Snake bite. Hold my horse!"

He slid from the saddle and approached the colt, speaking to it in a soft, caressing voice. The poor animal made no attempt to move. George patted its neck, passed his hand along the quivering flanks. Then he came back to Hazel.

"It's been bitten by a rattlesnake. I may save it, but 'twill be nip and tuck. You get off!"

She slid into his arms. He hitched both horses, and took from the horn of his saddle a lariat.

"Sit in the shade o' that rock," he commanded.

Hazel obeyed, thanking God she was not a man. As she moved she glanced timorously from right to left, expecting to see rattlesnakes coiled and poised for the deadly stroke. Then she sat down and watched George.

He tied up the colt and threw it, explaining afterwards that a horse is the most foolish and ungrateful of all animals, ready to savage the man who succors it, seemingly unable to distinguish between friend and foe.

Then he pulled out a big knife, opened it, and tried the edge upon his thumb. Hazel thought: "He is going to kill the poor creature." She wished to turn her eyes from that monstrous head, but couldn't. George examined the nose and lip, seeking for the puncture. Then he cut and slashed. Hazel turned aside her eyes, knowing that the sight of blood would make her sick. And well it might! For the blood was almost black, and flowed slowly. When it began to flow more freely George gave a grunt of satisfaction. He said to Hazel—

"I must make a bee line for home."

"Whatever for?"

Lost

"We've stuff handy. There's an antidote to the pizon which grows in these hills, and I've used it again and again. Nine times out o' ten the colts and calves recover. You stay here."

"Here? Among the snakes?"

"Pshaw! You won't see any. I'm taking a shorter trail."

Before she could put into words the protest forming upon her lips he had leaped on his horse and was out of sight. Hazel was furious with him. Who was George Spragge to issue his commands to Hazel Goodrich? How dared he ride away and leave her in this serpent-infested spot? How dared he?

She glanced about her, shudderingly, certain that a rattlesnake lurked behind every stone and in every bush. Moreover it was horribly hot. The sun poured vertical rays into a gorge sheltered from every breeze. The rocks refracted the heat. Through her thin shoes she could feel them baking hot beneath her feet. She thought of the glade above, and wondered whether she could reach it. She had never mounted a horse unaided.

Could she do it?

She decided to try. George must be taught a valuable lesson. Let him return to his precious colt to find her gone.

She approached her aged steed. As she did so she looked up and beheld the buzzards sailing through the blue. Horrible scavengers! If anything happened to her in this hateful place——! She dared not pursue the thought.

A sharp, strange noise made her start. It happened to be a locust, but she told herself it was the warning

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signal of *Crotalus horridus*. Also, it was quite impossible to "locate" the weird sound. She stood still, trembling. Never in her short life had she felt so helpless. A second locust answered the first, and then a third. Yes; the gorge was alive with reptiles. Then the first locust rose on whirring wing, and she was quick-witted enough to understand that she had been frightened nearly out of her senses by a miserable insect.

She smiled acidly. George would have to pay in full for these tremors.

II

She unhitched her horse, led him to a rock, and managed to mount him after several attempts. Once in the saddle, she regained self-possession. To her satisfaction the animal seemed to understand her wishes. The sagacious beast, no doubt, was thinking of the glade above and the water troughs beneath the shade of the huge ilex. He picked his way past a boulder whose shape she recognized. Hazel patted his neck, murmuring:

"Good horse! You don't want to stay here, do you?"

They moved slowly up the gorge till they came to a rough trail striking into the brush. Hazel made sure that this track led to the glade, but her horse seemed unwilling to leave the gorge. Hazel, with the conceit of the city-bred damsel, chose the track. The horse protested, but submitted. Hazel looked down, seeking for hoof-marks, but the ground was hard and rocky. She pushed on and up, quite sure that she was following the right path.

Unhappily, she wasn't.

Lost

The brush grew thicker, more impenetrable. Finally, the track, a mere thread in the wilderness, plunged downward into a steep gulch. Hazel dared not go on. She drew rein. The horse stopped obediently and took a mouthful of bunch-grass.

Obviously they must return to the gorge and begin again. But, retracing their steps, maid and beast encountered two tracks. Once again arose a difference of opinion; once again the girl's conceit triumphed over the instinct of the animal. Other tracks and cross-tracks, paths made by cattle and deer, intersected each other. By this time Hazel was reckless. She told herself, with the fatuity of ignorance, that all paths sooner or later led to roads of civilization.

At the end of an hour she knew that she was undone. Of course, George would find her, but for the moment she was lost in the wildest part of a wild cow county! She realized, also, that she was saddle-weary, intensely thirsty, and suffering from a sun headache. She appeared to be derelict upon an ocean of sea-green chaparral whose odors grew oppressively pungent.

She shed a few tears.

This was just after a great wild cat had bounded across the track. She remembered that George had spoken of mountain lions still to be found in this remote corner of the state.

Tearfully, she addressed her horse——

"You go right home, dear. I'll leave it to you."

She let the reins lie upon his neck and encouraged him to quicken his pace. The animal seemed to understand, for he began to move more quickly, but with an

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entire disregard for his rider, who, more than once, was almost swept from the saddle.

Presently they came to another gorge. The horse plunged down it. Hazel shut both eyes. She felt that she was sliding, slipping, scrambling into a bottomless pit. Instinctively she pulled the right rein with such violence that the horse swerved, crossed his forelegs, and fell. Hazel was thrown clear. Giddy and badly bruised, she staggered to her feet to behold her faithful friend trotting composedly out of sight!

She shouted for George, calling him by name. And she heard an answering shout, the nymph Echo mocking another nymph. Out of the hills floated her own voice, dying away to an attenuated whisper. She shouted again and again, till her voice became feeble. There was a long silence. She sat still, huddled up, clasping her knees, listening intently. Then the silence was broken by unfamiliar sounds. The wilderness spoke to her in its own language unintelligible to a dweller in cities. Strange rustlings terrified her. She made sure, poor child, that beasts were prowling about her, wild beasts and—snakes! She dared not move, thinking of the great cat which had just bounded in and out of sight with such terrific activity, seeing the monstrous head of the colt, a swift creature which had been unable to escape the swifter stroke of the rattlesnake. What chance would she have against the assault of mountain lions and serpents?

She rose to her feet.

Although badly bruised and aching sorely in every limb, she found herself able to walk, and essayed a few feeble steps, pausing to listen, and then advancing a few yards to listen again. At the bottom of the gorge bubbled

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a rivulet. What blessed music! She bathed her face and hands after slaking a feverish thirst. At any other time the beauty of the spot would have appealed to her. Now she gazed at Arcadia with hatred in eyes and heart. The meanest street in Oakland would have seemed heaven. She thought of the good aunt, duster in hand, fussing about the parlor at home. She thought of Wilbur P. Stocker. But always her thoughts returned to herself with accumulating misery. She dared not leave the gorge, because she had lost sense of direction. The sun shone vertically down. Thickets encompassed her. She was helplessly alone!

III

George returned to the colt to find Hazel gone, but her absence worried him little. Of course, she had gone home by the longer trail. Perhaps he would find her in the glade above. Meanwhile, the colt must be given undivided attention. He administered a drench of an infusion concocted from the dried leaves of the antidote. Then he removed his lariat and immediately the colt staggered to his feet. With difficulty George drove it in front of him, for it had not been halter-broken. They took nearly an hour to reach the troughs. After drinking some water the colt appeared better.

"You'll do," said George.

Not seeing Hazel, he assumed that she had ridden home. So he overhauled the troughs and made sure that the barb-wire fence on the south side of the back pasture was in good order. There was no fence on the north and east sides, because the Government land there had

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not been taken up by squatters. George ran his cattle and colts over leagues and leagues of more or less worthless brush.

It was dinner time when he reached home to discover that Hazel was still in the hills!

Of course, he became wildly excited. The women calmed him. Samantha told him that he could trust Hazel's horse. In time that faithful beast would carry her home.

"If he goes anywheres," said George, "he'll take her to Aguila. That's his home."

He galloped to the village, where he found Uncle Zed, about to hitch up his team. There was only one small livery stable in Aguila, and Hazel's horse had come out of it. To George's utter confounding and misery, Uncle Zed informed him that the plug had loped up within the hour. His bridle was trailing on the ground and one pummel had been knocked off a twenty-dollar saddle.

"Where's Miss Goodrich?"

"How's that?"

"Miss Goodrich. Our guest from Oakland."

"The city madam?"

"Where is she?" shouted George.

"You can search me," replied Uncle Zed.

"I'll search the hull doggoned earth for her," said George.

He collected half a score of men who were loafing about Aguila, men who knew the brush hills. George paid for one drink apiece before they took the road. He was beside himself with consternation and distress. Uncle Zed remarked:

"This is a jedgment on you, young man."

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They galloped to the gorge, pausing now and again to listen. Pistols were discharged, but sound travels no distance in a heavily wooded and hilly country. It was, however, a comfort to reflect that Hazel might hear the shots, although they could not hear her feeble cries.

When they reached the gorge George slid from the saddle. He began to examine the ground, seeking for what hunters call "sign." Anything, a dislodged stone, a broken twig of grass, a hoof-mark, might indicate the direction in which the girl had wandered. Presently George found what he sought, a hoof-mark. With consummate skill and patience he took up the trail. The other men formed themselves into line. They advanced at a snail's pace, pausing now and again to shout and listen. The fear of finding Hazel dead began to gnaw at George's vitals. Evidently she had been thrown. He beheld her dragged at the heels of a kicking horse, mangled beyond recognition!

Finally he heard her voice answering a pistol shot. Two minutes later he was beside her.

But during those two minutes Hazel had time to re-assume that smooth mask which is indeed a helmet of salvation to some women.

She advanced to meet him *smiling*.

A stranger would have said that the man had suffered abominably, not the maid. Hazel saw that he was trembling, that his blue eyes were brimming with tears. His face, too tanned to appear pale, was lined and livid. He could hardly speak, as he stumbled toward her with outstretched arms. Hazel said calmly:

"I knew you'd find me."

With a gesture she indicated the other men, standing

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sheepishly in the background. George wiped the sweat from his forehead as she told him what had happened. Her voice fell melodiously and smoothly upon his ears.

"You was scairt to death, surely?"

"I knew you'd find me."

"Ain't you hurt?"

"That's nothing."

Admiration began to flicker into his eyes. He turned to the other men, addressing them proudly:

"Boys, this is Miss Goodrich."

They removed their hats, staring at her, confounded by her smiling composure. Hazel knew that they were confounded. She thrilled with triumph, smiling at each man in turn.

"Thank you for coming," she said sweetly. "I am so ashamed to have given such trouble."

"Gee!" ejaculated George.

"How is the colt?" asked Hazel.

This was the crowning touch, the triumph of the civilized being, trained from the cradle to inspire awe and admiration in the uncivilized.

"She wasn't scairt," said George, looking at the men, who nodded.

"I knew you'd find me," she repeated.

IV

The men returned to the village. George lifted Hazel on to his own horse and led it home at a foot's pace. He did not say much, and Hazel, also, was well content to remain silent. A thousand times he looked up at her adoringly. Hazel belonged to that now diminishing army

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of American girls who expect to be enthroned upon pedestals and then worshiped as superior beings, accepting as their right such oblations as lifelong service and the unquestioned right to please themselves. After the discovery of gold in California, the women who accompanied the pioneers across the plains and round the Horn well earned the exalted position which was so enthusiastically accorded to them. To-day their daughters and granddaughters still expect that unstinted enthusiasm, that loyal service of lip and limb. But it may be asked if all of them deserve it. It may be questioned now whether the men of the West find it quite so blessed to give so much and demand in return so little? Not a few, who toil unceasingly to provide many dollars for their wives and daughters to spend and often squander, are growing restless. As one such expressed himself in Western phrase to the writer, they are "gettin' tired of standin'—*hitched!*"

Perhaps Hazel's triumph reached its apogee when she heard George reciting the incidents of the morning to his mother and Samantha. They, also, were tremendously impressed, although little was said by either of them. Each hovered about the heroine, zealously eager to minister to her comfort. With magnificent strength of mind Hazel resisted the temptation to retire to her own room and lie down. Mrs. Spragge suggested this.

"Why?" asked Hazel.

"Ain't you petered out, child?"

"Not much, she ain't," declared George.

"I feel fine," declared Hazel.

And she looked it. Her cheeks were glowing, her eyes sparkled. Perhaps, for the first time, she was breathing

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deep and good. In her mind the conviction established itself that, after all, she had risen superior to an abominable situation and justified her upbringing. With undimmed eyes she thought of the tears in George's blue orbs. Yes; he adored her. And with a passion never to be experienced by Wilbur P. Stocker. It was delightful to be loved like that. Beneath George's ardent glances she felt a delicious all-pervading glow, a permeating satisfaction, an indescribable sense of fulfilment. How many girls of her acquaintance were capable of evoking such devotion?

George waited upon her when she dined alone upon the front porch. From his clumsiness she guessed that never before had he served meat and drink to man or woman. Probably he despised such menial offices. In fine, he was debasing himself for her alone. What a zest to provoke appetite! When she rallied him, he exclaimed boyishly:

"Serve you on bended knee, I would!"

She hesitated, glancing at him demurely. Surely this was the moment to test him.

"That sounds too sweet for anything, but, all the same, you were not very nice to me yesterday."

"Mercy! What do you mean? Not nice? To—you?"

"I asked you a question, and you laughed. I shouldn't have minded your laughing, if you had answered it."

He appeared genuinely puzzled as he muttered:

"What question?"

"I asked you what you had in that sack."

He stared at her gravely; his jaw protruded. Hazel smiled at him, but her heart began to beat faster.

"You really want to know?"

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"Of course I do."

His reply disconcerted her. With a devastating abruptness he blurted out:

"Will you marry me?"

"Oh!"

His voice became tender.

"If you'll promise to marry me, I'll tell you."

"Why, we hardly know each other—I—I——"

She crumbled her bread, turning her eyes from him, blushing and uncomfortably aware that the arts which availed in Oakland would not serve in Spragge's Canyon. George misinterpreted these signals of distress. He said joyously:

"I know you're the daisiest girl on earth. That's enough fer me. I ain't a goin' to toot my own horn, but I'm pretty solid. I'm not high-toned, but, by thunder, I'm sound. You ought to know me, my pretty. I'm just about loco! That's the size of it. *Plum crazy!* You fill the hull world fer me. I've wanted you ever since the first day we met. I'd do anything for ye, anything."

"Except gratify my curiosity."

He winced. Her voice was cold, and yet she appeared to be moved. George squared his broad shoulders.

"Thar ain't a thing about me or my business that I won't share with you, if you'll promise to marry me."

Again she spoke sharply, with a rising inflection.

"Then there is something secret?"

"Put it that way if you like. I told you that I earned my living—and a good living—in many ways. I don't tell my business, or perhaps it mightn't be mine. There is such a thing as competition. See?"

Hazel frowned. George was exasperatingly justified in

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withholding confidence till the moment when she had established a sufficient claim to it. He continued urgently:

"You say 'yes,' and I'll tell ye all my secrets."

She shook her head. Instantly his voice became deprecating:

"Mebbe I've kind o' rushed things."

"Yes, you have."

"I allow I'm sorry. It's like me to grab at what I want. It's not easy to keep my hands off ye. But you're built different. I reckon you've never been warmed up yet?"

"No."

"Don't I stir your feelings any?"

"A little," she admitted.

"That's good. That's fine. That's quite enough fer me fer the moment. I'm pretty good on the wait, I am. Many a time I've watched half the night to get something I wanted."

"What?"

"A fine buck."

"I see."

"What else should I wait and watch for?"

"I didn't know. Perhaps a mountain lion."

"No use watchin' out fer them. But deer feed by moonlight, and they come to the same waterin' places. Many a fat buck I've killed that way."

"Didn't you get bored waiting?"

"Time slips along. There's things to think about. Wouldn't mind watchin' out to-night for instance, because naturally I'd be thinkin' of you."

Samantha appeared, not too suddenly. But an awkward moment followed, because each person happened

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to be ill at ease. Samantha feared that the morning's adventure had impressed Mrs. Spragge, and that this pretty stranger would be welcomed hereafter as worthy to be the mother of George's children. George, beholding Samantha's face, was able to measure his cousin's loss as contrasted with his prospective gain. Hazel, a prey to more disturbing and complex imaginings, was guiltily conscious of believing that George's vigils might be concerned with stagecoaches and green boxes containing gold and precious stones.

"It's you, Samantha," said George, stupidly.

"Yes," said Samantha, "it's me." She addressed Hazel. "Auntie wanted to know if you'd fancy some hot doughnuts?"

CHAPTER VII

WHICH ENDS WITH A SQUALL

I

THAT night Hazel went to bed at an early hour.

Alone and too excited to sleep she was able to reconsider the events of the day and their bearing upon present and future. At such moments she was fairly honest with herself, as honest, let us say, as a young woman can be who has been trained to set an inordinate value upon matters of secondary importance. Hitherto she had turned aside with maiden delicacy from primal instincts and predilections. Marriage, for example, with a suitable young man had been glimpsed at a decent distance, but invariably she had dwelt with a too smug complacency upon what marriage would bring to her, rather than what she would take to it. Ignorant of what such an intimate relationship meant she was not; innocent she might be called in the sense that, temperamentally, she had never taken into account emotions which as yet were slumbering. These emotions had been disturbed by George. She knew that they existed in some obscure zone of consciousness. They had begun to stir fitfully, to talk in their sleep with inarticulate murmurings. She dared not admit that she wanted George, although it was very exciting to reflect that he wanted her, wanted her desperately. Such a state of affairs was

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thrilling, because this splendid male managed somehow to convey the impression that, sooner or later, he got what he wanted. The condor was snatched from its eyrie; the stag fell to his shot!

Between Mrs. Spragge's rather coarse linen sheets Hazel shivered. The condor's unhappy fate might be hers.

Could she live happily in Spragge's Canyon? Imagination whirled her to the family cemetery. How awful to be buried in such a spot! How—lonesome! And the only doctor with a title to a diploma lived in San Lorenzo, miles and miles away!

Could she persuade George to leave his Canyon?

It was comforting to reflect that she was richer than this masterful man. With her money and his savings he could go into business, a business which might engross and increase his particular energies and abilities. He could buy and sell cattle and horses. She, of course, could live in Oakland, in her own house, surrounded by congenial people. If George succeeded greatly she might in due time cross the bay, and become a leader of society.

Would George succeed greatly?

She answered the question. Alone, transplanted from Spragge's Canyon, George might fail. But with the right helpmeet surely he would not fail. How easy it would be—and how pleasant!—to develop George! All said, there was not much to do: a Doric speech and accent to be transmuted, by Love's alchemy, into the golden Attic of Oakland, the manners of the corral—and men who wield the lariat have good manners—to be polished and refined to the pattern set by Wilbur P. Stocker.

The keystone of this arch, spanning the future like a

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rainbow, would fall into its appointed place when George became a member of the First Presbyterian Church!

She beheld George in a frock coat, honorably known upon the Pacific Slope as a "Prince Albert." He was wearing a silk hat and patent leather shoes. He was holding a plate which the rank and fashion of the First Presbyterian Church were piling high with dollars and gold pieces. All the women would envy her.

Behind these imaginings was the man himself. Yes; she *wanted* George.

But she hated Spragge's Canyon. The memory of what she had suffered when she found herself alone would remain an imperishable horror. Apart from this hateful experience were the isolation of the ranch and the lamentable absence of congenial people.

Slowly the determination to marry George and to tear him out of his Canyon gathered strength. That would be a real test of his love. Within a few days he would ask her again to become his wife. He would insist upon an answer. The situation exacted a woman's tact. She would be constrained to dissemble, because the brutal admission that she loathed his home would confound him. It must be made plain that he had grown too big for his environment, that Spragge's Canyon would change him from a man into a mouse.

She thought of Wilbur P. Stocker. George, if she married him, must soar above Wilbur. Her cheeks glowed in the darkness and her soft little body turned restlessly from side to side when she thought of Wilbur as husband. It seemed absurd to record such trifles, but her mind dwelt upon the fact that Mr. Stocker suffered

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from dyspepsia and was in the habit of taking soda-mint lozenges after meals.

Yes, yes, yes; she did want George.

Before she composed herself to sleep she had disposed satisfactorily of Mrs. Spragge and Samantha. Mrs. Spragge, she had discovered, did own a half-interest in the ranch, and Samantha—according to George—could “run it.” Very well! Let them run it together. It would be cruelty indeed to expect Mrs. Spragge to leave the Canyon. After her death it could be sold.

Presently Hazel fell asleep, but she awoke soon with an odd sense of something left unsettled. Curiosity once more assailed her. Curiosity—but she did not know this—had beguiled her into making George’s acquaintance, because he was so different from other men. Curiosity had turned this acquaintance into friendship, impelling her to accept his invitation, to plunge headlong into the wilderness. Curiosity, again, had made her fall in love, for at last she admitted that she was in love. Lastly, curiosity stood between her and the acceptance of that love.

What was the secret of the sack?

Her thoughts circled about the green Wells, Fargo box. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the secret, not to be disclosed till she had promised to marry George, was of such a nature as to make marriage with him impossible?

Grappling with this problem she fell asleep for the second time, and slumbered soundly till long after dawn.

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II

At breakfast next day she joined the family triangle and squared it with a charming laugh. She bore no signs of her misadventure other than cheeks of a sun-kissed pink and eyes which sparkled with excitement. The spirit of the West possessed her. Unexplored tracts of character and temperament lured her on. She disliked early rising, but the desire "to make good" triumphed gloriously over a bruised and weary body.

"Why! You ain't up?" exclaimed George.

She decided that this habit of asking silly questions must be broken by mild chaff.

"Oh, no. I'm still in bed and dreaming."

Never had she looked so wide awake.

Mrs. Spragge and Samantha saluted her politely. Hazel flashed a searching glance at their working clothes, and thought happily of the virginal sprigged muslin which adorned her trim person. A thin black velvet riband accentuated the whiteness of her throat; she wore no meretricious ornaments; a leather strap, encircling her slender wrist, held a tiny watch; her hair was arranged with admirable simplicity. Samantha sighed when she beheld her.

"I'm going to earn my board to-day," said Hazel, as she attacked the mush.

"Not much," observed George. "I'll take you sailin'."

"In the afternoon—perhaps."

Artfully she talked to the two women, who replied in monosyllables. Mrs. Spragge's grim features began to relax beneath a softening prattle. Hazel praised the mush,

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and wondered why it was quite impossible to buy thick yellow cream in Oakland.

"Things do taste so good here," she said.

"Grub's O.K.," observed George, "and there's a plenty of it."

He piled up a plate with beans and bacon. Hazel remonstrated:

"Gracious! I can't eat all that!"

"You start right in and down it! Nothing like beans and bacon to stick to the ribs."

"Georgie," said his mother.

"Yes, Maw?"

"That ain't the way to talk to a young lady."

"Pshaw! Ain't she got ribs? I want to put a bit more flesh on 'em before she goes back to Oakland."

"You must excuse him," Mrs. Spragge addressed her guest.

"I like plain food and plain speech," replied Hazel. For the moment she believed that she was telling the truth.

"I knew it," exclaimed George triumphantly.

Hazel ambled on, ignoring George and gazing at his mother.

"Shall I confess that I'm tired of city food and talk?"

"You bet yer life!"

"George," said his mother severely, "Miss Goodrich is speakin', and I'll thank you not to interrupt her."

George looked rather astonished. Samantha wriggled uneasily. She could account for the mother's tartness. Granting that George was head over heels in love with this radiant creature, he might, poor fellow, have at least

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the decency to keep his heart up his sleeve instead of on it.

"Please go on, Miss Goodrich."

"I simply can't, if you call me that. I'm tired of formality, too. It is so refreshing to meet people who say what they think——"

"But we don't," remarked Mrs. Spragge. "George does when he feels like it. Samantha and I don't. No woman I ever knew does."

"Who's interruptin' now?" asked George with a genial derision.

Hazel continued suavely, aware that she had underrated Mrs. Spragge's intelligence.

"Then I'll confine my remarks to—George." She brought out his name with quite adorable hesitation. Samantha got up and bustled into the kitchen.

"Bully for you," said George proudly.

"George persuaded me to come here. How did he do it? Because he described his home and you, Mrs. Spragge, so vividly and convincingly. He thrilled me. He made me—how shall I put it?—see things as he sees them. I know nothing about life lived at first hand. As he said, I had never really breathed deep and good, although I had taken lessons from a professor."

This statement challenged Mrs. Spragge's attention.

"Lessons in breathing," she repeated.

"Yes, indeed. They were quite expensive. We formed a large class."

"There ain't air in Oakland," affirmed George.

"Oh, yes, there is. I am not speaking quite literally. I am thinking of the lungs of the mind. The lungs of my mind want fresh air. George provides that. I'm so

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obliged to him. And I want him to go on talking freely, not to pick his words as city men do, not to say things merely to please me. I hope I've made myself plain."

"You couldn't," said George fatuously.

Mrs. Spragge frowned. Hazel puzzled her. What was the girl at? George, in any case, was cheapening himself by paying silly compliments. She said tartly:

"Don't be fullish, my son! Ain't you got ter irrigate the berry patch?"

George laughed and took the hint. Let Hazel talk to his mother alone. What a talker she was! Uncle Zed must be invited to join the family circle on Sunday. The old man had dared to scoff at city madams. Let him behold the flower of Magnolia Avenue and inhale its fragrance!

He went to the berry patch.

III

Mrs. Spragge looked searchingly at Hazel. Did the girl really want plain speech? Then she should have it.

She began stiffly:

"George told me that he had asked you to marry him."

"Oh!"

"He allowed he'd rushed things, but I reckon you mean to hev him, or you wouldn't hev come here."

Hazel felt very uncomfortable, but she faced the mother valiantly.

"I came here," she said with dignity, "because I liked George better than any man I had ever met, but I don't know him well enough to promise to marry him."

"Good! You've got more sense, dearie, than I give

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you credit for. I'll allow that I was not overly pleased when George told me about you. I suspicioned that he'd bin caught by a pretty face. Wal, what I've seen of you I like first rate, but it's up to you to prove to me that you air the right wife for my George. More, it's up to me to tell you truthfully what I kin about my own boy. He's simple, is George, but he's strong. And there's women—I don't say you're one of 'em—who mistake simplicity fer weakness. George is not weak."

"Would he appeal to me if he were, Mrs. Spragge?"

"Mebbe not."

"Anything you can tell me about your son would be so interesting."

"First and last, he ain't one to change his idees. And if he don't suit you *jest as he is* you won't be able to make him over."

A slight pause followed. Then Hazel said tentatively:

"George doesn't propose—you don't propose, do you?—that he should stand still? He wants to advance, to develop, to——"

She broke off for Mrs. Spragge was shaking her massive head.

"My dear, it's this way. I hope he will advance, but if he does it will be at his own gait, along his own road."

"Thank you," said Hazel.

Mrs. Spragge rose, coming round the table till she stood beside Hazel. Her fine face broke into a rare smile. She laid her hand upon the girl's shoulder, pressing it softly. When she spoke the austerity had gone from her voice.

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"If you can make my son happy I shall love you dearly, Hazel."

She bent down and kissed her.

Of course Hazel responded, perhaps with more effusion than was necessary. But it struck her as humorous that Mrs. Spragge had not considered George's capacity for making a wife happy. Perhaps she took it for granted. Or, more probably, she belonged to an almost extinct generation who believe that woman's happiness can best be secured by constant ministration to the selfish and exacting male. Mrs. Spragge's next words confirmed this hypothesis.

"George," she remarked, reminiscently, "takes after his paw. Laban Spragge was brainy and strong. When I merried him I had idees."

"Please tell me what your ideas were."

"I'd a notion that I knew better than him what he wanted; what would be jest right fer him. I was agen his settlin' down here."

"Were you?"

The girl's tone expressed the liveliest interest.

"I wish you could hev seen this ranch before we come into it. In them times the Pikers and squatters were pushing on and on into the foothills, because the valley land was mostly taken up. We pushed into this. Sakes alive! it looked awful, jest sage brush and chaparral, coyotes and rattlers. Wal, Mr. Spragge took no kind o' notice of anything excep' the creek. It ran singin' to the ocean, jest as it does to-day. 'Hear that?' sez he. 'Hear what?' sez I. 'The song o' the creek,' sez he. 'What does it tell to you, Almira?' I answered him mighty quick: 'It tells me nothing, Laban.' He tole me thar and then

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that I was a damn fool. He tole me that I knew jest enough to go in when it rained, instead of stayin' out an' collectin' rain water. He tole me what water could do in this part o' Californy. He tole me what he could do with water. I sot in our old wagon and jest naturally smiled at him, because I'd made up my mind that God intended him to keep store and charge about three prices for his goods. I aimed to help him in the store, an' was lookin' forward to flimflamin' the fools that Heaven might send our way. That was—*me*. I was plum full o' sass and inexperience. We come mighty near to quarrelin' right here in the Canyon. Georgie takes after his paw in the way o' plain speech. Finally Laban sez to me: 'Almiry, thar seems to be jest one o' two things fer me to do, an' you kin take yer choice of 'em. I can up an' leave ye to keep store and flimflam fools, or I kin wale the damnfollishness out o' ye with a club. Which is it goin' to be?'"

"He never dared to strike you?" said Hazel.

"He'd hev done it right enough, and in fine shape, too. If ever a silly woman needed a good walin' I did that afternoon. My dear, because I knew that he meant jest what he said, I answered up, mild as milk."

"Whatever did you say?"

"I allowed that he must please himself. And he did. You kin see what he done. Mighty soon I knew that he'd bin right, and me wrong. We worked together till he died. I made him happy, so he tole me, and he made me happy. George is carryin' on his paw's work."

"Is there anything more to do here?"

"There's always a plenty to do on any ranch, if it's run accordin' to Hoyle. George aims to develop more

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water and irrigate more land. He's bin improvin' our breed o' cattle and horses right along."

"I see."

But, of course, she didn't. Or, rather, what she saw, what she dimly apprehended, only served to fortify her resolution to use every means within her power to divert George's energies elsewhere. She helped Mrs. Spragge to wash up, Samantha being busy in the dairy; she darned some linen most beautifully; she sang one or two little songs to the elder woman, Eugene Field's songs about children, set to pretty music; and then she went to her own room, satisfied that her morning had been thoroughly well spent.

Alone again, she consulted a kind, flattering friend—her looking-glass. No mere casual glance at the familiar image, but a careful, critical examination from which she withdrew triumphant. If Mrs. Spragge had possessed delicate features, a skin as smooth as ivory, small white teeth, and eyes shaded by long lashes, her husband would never have threatened to leave her or to beat her. She felt reasonably certain that Mrs. Spragge in her best days could never have inspired such a passion as had been aroused in the heart of George. Had not George said that he would do anything for her? And he meant it.

She must reckon upon the active hostility of the mother and Samantha. A fight, indeed, impended, ending in a victory for beauty and brains.

She felt delightfully excited and elated.

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IV

That afternoon she went sailing with George, and during her absence Mrs. Spragge enjoyed a confidential talk with Samantha which might have astonished Hazel had she happened to overhear it. As the two women sewed together on the porch, Mrs. Spragge said solemnly:

"Samanthy, she gave herself dead away this morning."

"Did she?"

"Yas, she did. Pretty thing she is, clever, too, but she thinks me a cacklin' old fool. I want her to think that. All the same I can't help likin' the child."

"Nor can I," admitted Samantha.

"She's dead sot on gittin' George outer this."

"Auntie, what do you mean?"

"She hates the ranch. I don't blame her."

"Hates Spragge's Canyon?"

"Like pizon."

"She never told you that."

"O' course not, but I jest know it. Now, is she goin' to win out? Is she goin' to down me and you and George?"

"Mebbe," said Samantha. She added nervously: "George has the worse kind of a dose."

"We'd be fullish to deny it."

They stared thoughtfully at each other. Samantha betrayed no mawkish modesty, attempted no futile evasions and pretenses. She loved George, and the sight of him aflame for another woman made her sick. Presently she murmured:

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"Is there anything we kin do?"

"Nothing—except watch and pray. I've more faith in watchin' than prayin'. Also, I know my son, and she don't. I've a notion to give her a free hand. It ain't fer me to tell George what I think. When a mother gives a son a bit of her mind she may find it mighty hard to git it back again. Me and you must lie low, Samantha. She's pretendin' with us. We'll pretend with her. I made a bad start this morning. I was short with George. I shall be sweet as pie to both of 'em from now on. George'll never be able to say that he hed to choose between us an' her. You sit tight, like a bump on a log, and, if you feel like it, git in some good solid licks a-prayin'."

Samantha nodded. But her bosom heaved as she said despondently:

"She's awful takin' in her ways."

"She is that."

"If she loves George good an' true——"

"You take it from me that she loves Hazel Goodrich more'n George. That's whar she'll slip up. That's whar many women do slip up when they come to grips with strong men. I'm a countin' on George's strength."

"Well," said Samantha, after a lengthy pause, "I shall do some tall prayin', Auntie. Seems to me that's all I kin do."

After that they talked of other matters.

V

Meanwhile George and his beloved were drifting across a summer sea; a blaze of blue above and beneath. Out of it and into it flashed the white gulls. The man

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was teaching the maid how to steer, and finding her an apt pupil. A gentle breeze from the West filled the sail. George discoursed upon the wonders of the deep. Hazel listened, staring at the hand which grasped the tiller. It fascinated her. She wondered whether it could be raised in fierce anger to strike a woman. Several times, when she held the tiller, that hand closed firmly upon hers. And at each contact she experienced thrills. It pleased her that her lover exercised restraint when he touched her. She felt safe with him. But his eyes glowed whenever their glances met.

"You like this?" he asked.

"It's heavenly."

"We're in luck. It ain't always smooth at this time o' year. More often than not, it's smoother in the late fall and winter. Less fog, too, but the fogs are fine for the feed. Better than dew. Our Canyon holds the fogs and sucks the moisture out of 'em."

"Your talk always rambles back to the Canyon."

"That's so. Natural enough, too. It's sweet, ain't it, to have a home to ramble back to?"

"Oh, yes, indeed."

The sympathy in her soft voice moved him to flights never yet attempted. He became poetical.

"Most folks hev a home o' sorts, but do all their thoughts ramble back there? Mine do."

She murmured tentatively:

"Don't you ever feel the need of more than your ranch can give you?"

"By gum! When I look at you I do."

"I meant something else. Don't you want more intercourse with people, more friction with other minds?"

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"We see our neighbors. Thar's pleasant folks livin' in Aguila. I'd like you to meet Perfesser Bungard an' his wife. She taught school onct. Taught me. I must fix up a barbecue. I'll make you acquainted with Mis' Geldenheimer, wife o' the storekeeper, a mighty peart little lady. Full o' snap she is."

"Of course your ranch is a sweet little place."

"*Little?*"

"Isn't it little?"

"You called it that before, an' I said then that it took me the most o' my time to run it right."

He spoke curtly. Hazel could hardly escape the conclusion that George thought she was talking foolishly upon matters she did not and could not understand. This stimulated her fighting instincts, and provoked that curious sex hostility which is at last receiving some attention from our psychologists. She decided that the moment was ripe for battle. This fine young man must be made to respect his antagonist. Very firmly, using a carefully sharpened weapon, she murmured:

"Relatively speaking, Spragge's Canyon is small for *you*."

The thrust went home. Hazel smiled when she perceived that he was *touched*, as fencers say. He repeated the last three words:

"Small for me. Why—for *me?*"

"Perhaps," continued Hazel slowly, with her eyes frankly meeting his puzzled glance, "perhaps I have too high an opinion of you—George."

For the second time that day her caressing tone as she called him by name inspired ardor.

"I do love to hear you call me George. I never cared

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overly much about my first name till, till this morning."

"Is that so? But you must answer my question," her voice grew insistent; "have I made a mistake? Are you as, as small as your ranch?"

"For the land's sake!"

"Are you?"

Plainly he was puzzled, as, of course, she intended him to be. She went on:

"Take the tiller, please. I must give all my attention to you."

He took the tiller, glanced upward at the sail, noted the course of the boat, and then stared steadily at the girl. Did he behold for the first time the eternal woman, the original Eve, so fair to look upon, outwardly desirable, and, alas! so strange a document to understand and interpret. She continued:

"Do you know the essential difference between a small man and a big man?"

"I guess so; but tell me your idee."

The words dropped very deliberately from her lips as she lay back watching him.

"A big man runs his business, whatever it may be; a small man is run by it."

He grasped her meaning instantly.

"You think that Spragge's Canyon runs me."

"Not yet. It may."

"Why?"

His tone was defiant, and she wished it to be so. And, for the moment, he had ceased to be her lover. Quite obviously he was prepared to thresh out the question she had raised.

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"Your mother owns a half interest, doesn't she?"

"Of course!"

"And she's a masterful woman."

"You bet!"

"You said that Samantha could manage the ranch in your absence."

"In a way—yes."

"Suppose something happened to you, would the ranch go back?"

"Mebbe not."

"Wouldn't things go on much as usual? Hasn't the most of the work been done already by, by your father and mother? Can you say, as your father could, that Spragge's Canyon is really and truly yours, that you have made it, created it? Aren't you in a way rather like me?"

"Like you?"

"I am not particularly proud of what I have. My father was a poor man, like yours. He was as proud of our marble steps as you are of Spragge's Canyon. They meant much to him. They mean nothing to me. What he left I have taken good care of. His estate has not gone back under my management, but everything I have I owe to him, not to myself."

"I'm hot on the trail," said George. "Go on."

"I have ambitions," said Hazel sharply. "I should despise myself, although I am a woman, if I was satisfied with what another has given to me. And you are a man, a strong, intelligent man, a son of the West."

She paused. Her hand trailed in the water; her attitude indicated repose; she was smiling pleasantly. But her eyes were filled with sparkling notes of interrogation.

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George remained silent, staring keenly at her. Happily he had understood. He perceived the vital flames in her. Would he light his torch at her fires?

VI

Presently he spoke. She perceived that he was terribly handicapped for lack of a vocabulary; his weapons, poor fellow, had been forged in a foothill school among the children of Pikers. He had "taken" no lessons from professors.

"Them marble steps," he began and paused——

"Yes?"

"They meant much, you say, to your father. But it seems to me that when he put the price of a house and lot into them his business was beginnin' to run him. I hate to say it, but wasn't he puttin' on too much style?"

"Possibly. He was getting old. His work was done."

"I ain't throwin' stones at him, but I despise frills. It almost seems in this country, where every man has his chance, that the makin' o' big money, more'n a man can use, ends in frills. See?"

"I follow you perfectly."

"If the maker of the pile don't put on frills, his folks do. The women slosh around in furs and diamonds, and the boys play the races and drink whiskey. Me and Maw have talked it over considerable. Take the crowd as owns the Aguila ranch. The old man is a big bug back East, but his folks are rotten."

"That is such an ugly word."

"Sorry. It fits. I can't sling words the way you

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do, but I feel things. Mebbe a sort o' instinct tells me not to bite off more'n I kin chew."

He relapsed into the vernacular as his thoughts, struggling for utterance, rose to the surface.

"Better more than less," observed Hazel.

"True enough! You was speakin' of ambitions. I've mine."

"I'm sure you have. I want them to be worthy of you."

"That's where the cussedness o' human nature comes right in. A man's ambitions should be his, eh? Something springin' out of his own head and heart, something that he feels he can tackle an' make a square job of. If a feller's workin' on somebody else's ambitions, they ain't his, air they? Can he take credit for them? Ain't he more likely to muss 'em all up?" He paused, adding deprecatingly: "I'm askin' a lady who's posted in such things. I ain't posted. I know that. But I've a tol'able notion of what I kin do, and what I can't. A man may be mighty smart in a cow-county and all kinds of a fool in a city."

His shrewdness disconcerted Hazel. She was preparing, however, an adequate answer when an incident occurred which made talk give place to action.

"Gosh!" exclaimed George.

"What has happened?"

"Squall comin' up —quick!"

In midsummer such squalls are frequent upon the Pacific. They are likely to rage furiously upon the days when the trade wind blows lightly. George had been steering a northerly course, hugging a coast broken up into high masses of cliff intersected by deep ravines. A

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wind from the land, rushing down a long valley and striking an incoming tide will produce a miniature tempest.

Hazel looked ahead. A line of foam seemed to be advancing swiftly. Behind it the surface of the ocean had changed from azure to indigo.

"No time to shorten sail," said George. "We must go about. I fear me you'll get wet."

He tore off his coat and flung it at her.

"Put that on—quick."

She obeyed as the boat swung around. The squall struck the port quarter. The starboard gunwale dipped so suddenly that Hazel was flung against George. He gripped her with one hand, loosening the sheet. The boat staggered and then rushed on. A shower of spray swept from stern to stem. But the squall seemed to be increasing in violence.

"Must lower the sail," said George. "Can you hold the tiller?"

For one instant Hazel hesitated. She was paralyzed with fear. Once more her will conquered. She heard herself saying:

"Of course."

"Jam it over! Keep it jammed!"

His fierce grasp emphasized the command. George gripped the sheet between his teeth. Hazel could see the muscles on cheek-bones and throat standing out in knots. He crept forward. The boat had begun to pitch tremendously. He reached the mast and lowered the big sail. The boat, carrying no other canvas than a small jib, raced on upon a smoother and more even keel.

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George stowed the sail and began to bale out the water. Then he went back to the tiller.

"It's O.K.," he said cheerfully. "Served me right! I was cacklin' about things I don't understand and neglectin' what I do. As for you—well, by thunder! you beat the band. Do you know that we was as near as two two's capsized?"

"Yes."

"I'm damned! I beg yer pardon, but I jest naturally can't help swearin' a mite."

Hazel said calmly:

"Are we still in danger?" She was well aware that the danger was over, but the opportunity to soar to even giddier heights was irresistible. George replied heartily:

"Safe as houses now. The squall is racin' past. There was jest one resky minute."

"When you asked me to take the tiller?"

"Yep. Single-handed I couldn't hev kept her straight and taken in sail. If my teeth hadn't stood the strain, me and you would be swimmin' at this minute."

"I can't swim."

"Then we'd be sinkin' together."

He put out his hand to take the tiller, but she did not move. He placed his hand over hers. So they sat for at least a minute. Then George said:

"Seems to me I'm doin' my level best to scare you cold. Firstly, that derned brake not holdin'; secondly, gittin' lost in the brush hills; thirdly—this."

The squall was almost over; color crept back into Hazel's cheeks. George examined her critically, gripping her soft little hand which lay passive beneath his.

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"You're—fine, thoroughbred, by gum!"

She met his glance calmly, although her heart was beating.

"Shall I tell you what I think of you?"

He nodded, moving closer to her.

"You *are* too big for Spragge's Canyon."

CHAPTER VIII

UNCLE ZED IS IMPRESSED

I

TWO days passed. Once again Hazel's curiosity was provoked by seeing George disappear into the brush with sack and forked stick. Van Horne wanted more rattlesnakes, and George had promised another dozen when he returned with Hazel to Oakland. Knowing the horror that these reptiles inspired in his beloved, he had particularly warned his mother and Samantha to be "mum" in regard to them. Mrs. Spragge observed tartly:

"Mystery-makin' is fullishness."

George retorted as tartly:

"Miss Goodrich wouldn't sleep a wink if she knew snakes was in the house."

"If she takes you she'll hev to know."

"I reckon to quit rattler huntin' if she takes me. I'd quit now, but I promised Van Horne."

Mrs. Spragge shrugged her shoulders.

Upon Sunday Uncle Zed Byles came to the midday meal, not, however, without protest.

"I ain't fixed up for city madams," he remarked.

"You've got to fix up, old man," George replied genially. "Miss Goodrich is goin' to scrape some moss off you." Then, with keen relish, he descanted upon

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the city madam's pluck, her adaptability, her enchanting desire to please. Uncle Zed grunted, not to be shaken from his conviction that George was a lovesick idiot.

"I'll be thar," he said at length, "though I ain't a comin' to look at her or you," as he spoke he expectorated freely, "but to pay my respects to your maw, an' to eat a square meal sech as I never git to home."

"Right," said George.

Uncle Zed appeared in deepest sable, pants, vest and coat of rusty broadcloth, worn at funerals in the brave days when such functions in San Lorenzo County were of supreme interest and entertainment.

George presented him to Hazel. Uncle Zed was extremely polite. In his time had he not driven famous men and beautiful women? Had he not talked upon equal terms to them and with them?

Hazel took his thin, wrinkled hand, assuring him that she was happy to make his acquaintance. The old fellow nodded grimly. In honor of the occasion he was wearing his false teeth, which clicked whenever he spoke, because they had long ceased to fit him properly. Samantha and Mrs. Spragge were greeted with geniality. Uncle Zed eyed his hostess with real affection.

"A bit more fleshy, Marm," he remarked critically, "but *you* can stand it. Samanthy 'pears to hev plumped up some sence I saw her last."

Samantha blushed. Within the year she had discarded a habit of wriggling whenever attention was directed to herself. She wanted to wriggle now, but Hazel's eyes were on her. Since meeting Hazel temptation assailed her to send for some flesh-reducing preparation adver-

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tised in the *San Lorenzo Weekly Tribune*. George said pleasantly:

"Samanthy's good and solid."

Uncle Zed fished a letter out of a capacious pocket.

"No mail fer you folks," he said. "This is fer Miss Goodrich."

Hazel glanced at the envelope, but did not open it.

They went into the parlor, where the table had been decorated by Hazel. In the middle was a linen centerpiece, elaborately embellished by what is called in California Spanish work. Hazel had brought it to Spragge's Canyon as a gift to George's mother. Upon and around this dainty bit of needlework were maidenhair ferns and wild white lupin. Uncle Zed had never seen the like, and jumped too swiftly to the conclusion that the scheme of decoration was Samantha's.

George said gleefully:

"Miss Goodrich done it. She worked the centerpiece. There's jest nothing she can't do."

"Set ye down," enjoined Mrs. Spragge.

It was a hot day and Uncle Zed would have liked to remove his coat. He glanced longingly at a peg upon the door.

"Take off yer coat, Mr. Byles," said his hostess, "if ye feel like it."

"I don't feel like it," said Uncle Zed. He glanced about him, noting something unfamiliar. Some of the furniture had been moved. Things—so Uncle Zed decided—had been slicked up by the city madam. What sense was there in litterin' up a parlor with wild flowers an' branches o' trees!

"Regler bower!" exclaimed George.

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Uncle Zed nodded mournfully, but his eyes brightened when Samantha brought in the soup-tureen. Mrs. Spragge was famous for her chowder. Uncle Zed attacked it. After swallowing a few mouthfuls he remarked with enthusiasm:

"This ain't the old chowder, more of a clam soup, Marm, I should say."

"It's a clam *purée*," explained George.

"I want to know. Wal, I never ate better soup, not even in this house."

George said sharply:

"'Tain't a bit better than what you ate las' time you was here."

Uncle Zed replied solemnly:

"Yas; it is better. I'd reckoned yer maw couldn't improve in her cookin', but she kin. This soup makes me glad that I've lived to swaller it."

In a loud mocking voice George proclaimed the truth.

"Miss Hazel Goodrich made it."

"She didn't?"

He looked anxiously at Mrs. Spragge, who nodded.

"I'm ever so glad you like it, Mr. Byles," murmured Hazel.

George added quickly:

"She took lessons in fancy cookin' las' fall."

Uncle Zed finished his soup in silence.

"Lemme send you another helpin'?" suggested Mrs. Spragge.

Uncle Zed licked his lips, but he replied firmly:

"I've hed a great sufficiency, Marm."

A dish of trout followed the soup. Samantha waited at table. When the turkey appeared, Samantha sat down.

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Mrs. Spragge carved the turkey, while George cut into a home-cured ham. Fancy pickles, cranberry sauce, and many vegetables engrossed Uncle Zed's attention. He consumed what was set before him swiftly and in silence. When George asked—"Makin' out, Uncle?" he replied with unction: "I like good comp'ny and good victuals. When they come together, like this yere, I'm jest as near Heaven as I ever expect ter be."

He addressed Hazel, who sat next to him, and she noted an accent of defiance. Mr. Byles wished the city madam to understand that Spragge's Canyon, and what it held (everything caught or raised on the premises), was an earthly paradise, Eden itself, before the serpent crawled into it. A desire consumed her to capture this moss-back, this Silurian. She was too clever to talk about art and literature, but she thought, reasonably enough, that Uncle Zed might be interested in San Francisco politics. At that time a sustained effort was being made by certain optimists to purge municipal affairs of "graft." Wilbur P. Stocker was concerned in this upward movement. Hazel repeated Wilbur's matured opinions. George listened with slightly overstrained attention. The others appeared to be politely bored. Nevertheless, Hazel accomplished her object, Uncle Zed was impressed. He stared at the pretty, clever stranger with deeper attention. Samantha, also, stole furtive glances at Hazel, wondering miserably why everything was bestowed upon some folks. 'Twasn't fair. Till now she had accepted as a cardinal clause in her simple creed the essential justice of Omnipotence. She had envied none. To-day she doubted fiercely the goodness of God. Mrs. Spragge may have divined what was pasing through

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that artless mind. With seeming irrelevance, as Hazel paused in the selection of a nice phrase, George's mother remarked placidly:

"Turkeys is mighty hard to raise on the coast."

George alone of those present understood the purpose of this statement. In the language of the corral Maw was trying to "cut out" Hazel. Indiscreetly he rushed to the rescue. He addressed Uncle Zed:

"Two days ago me an' Miss Goodrich had a mighty close call. We was out sailin' . . ."

He told the story excitedly, quite unaware that his praise was becoming a penance to Hazel. He touched not too lightly upon the other misadventures, summing up riotously:

"Done my level best to scare her, but, gee! she ain't to be scared. No yelpin', no keelin' over in a dead faint, no fullishness. Allers—she makes good."

Unquestionably Uncle Zed was captured. Perhaps he felt the coil of the lariat about his wrinkled throat. To free himself he said desperately:

"Once I was run away with down the San Lorenzy grade." He turned to Hazel. "In them days I useter drive the six-horse stage between Salinas and San Lorenzy."

"Everybody knows that, Mr. Byles."

The old fellow looked flattered, but he continued emphatically:

"There's ugly twists on that grade. I made up my mind we was goin' to be piled up—*sure!* Nex' me sat a young lady, purty as they make 'em. Wal, we spun around the first turn on the two near wheels. As the stage righted itself, the young lady sez to me, as ca'm as

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ca'm kin be, 'I do jest love this—it's fine!' That's what she sez, an' she meant it. *She didn't know enough to be scared.*"

He paused. There was an awkward silence, broken by George.

"Miss Goodrich did know."

"I ain't denyin' it," said Uncle Zed. "Air these cookies of yer own bakin', Marm?"

"They air," replied Mrs. Spragge.

"Then I'll help myself."

The meal, crowned by a strawberry shortcake, was over. Hazel had triumphed. Magnificently had she emerged from the ordeal of George's praise. Once more Mrs. Spragge remarked:

"I was sayin' that turkeys was mighty hard to raise on the coast."

This time she prevailed. Uncle Zed took the floor, as she hoped he would. He jumped at the chance of displaying a particular knowledge concerning poultry. Hazel listened, astounded at the memories of these people for unimportant details. Uncle Zed brought to life turkeys that had died before Samantha was born. Mrs. Spragge skilfully steered the talk from turkeys to hogs:

"I mind me when we'd as nice a lot o' shotes, jest a hundred of 'em——"

"One hundred an' two," interpolated Samantha.

"The child's right, and she was only ten at the time——"

"Jest nine, Auntie."

"Yer agen right. I'd told ye to quit runnin' about in a pair o' George's old pants. As I was sayin' we'd a

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hundred an' two shotes, averagin' 'bout eighty pounds apiece. Hog fever wiped out the lot."

"We saved jest three," said George, "the runtiest! That was the dry season. We'd locusts, too."

"Ticks on the horses," added Uncle Zed, "and, later, by reason o' bein' out o' condition, all the colts in this township come down with epizoötic. It kep' me a hustlin' night an' day."

"You must have driven hundreds of horses, Mr. Byles. Do you remember all of them?"

Hazel put the question to the veteran.

"I dó," he replied proudly.

Samantha joined in the talk. The dairy was her pitch. She discoursed fluently upon cows. Apparently the milking of a Frisian Holstein three times a day was the most exciting experience of her life.

So the talk flowed on, till it strayed under George's guidance into the back pasture.

Hazel listened, realizing at last what life in Spragge's Canyon actually was. The amount of work accomplished by this one family staggered her. And such work was well done because each worker loved the work. Hitherto she had despised ranch-life, believing that any fairly intelligent person could run a small ranch. The few days she had spent in the Canyon fortified this conviction. On her account, these indefatigable workers had taken things easy "for a spell." The ranch had run itself.

Possibly at no other time and in no other way could this city maiden have gleaned such a mass of information. It overwhelmed her, because it was revealed by each speaker unconsciously. Warmed by good food and drink they spoke volubly, as if to make up for weeks

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of silence. Knowing each other intimately they chattered on without reserve, sitting at table long after the shortcake was finished. Uncle Zed and George smoked.

And this interminable talk about their own affairs became the more impressive because it was so essentially serious, so free from humor or even amusing slang. Hazel kept on saying to herself: "Yes, this is their life. This suffices them. They don't read books or even newspapers, apart from the county weekly; they care for nothing outside their tiny circle. But they do care tremendously for everything inside." In a sort of dream she heard Mrs. Spragge's voice with its drawling, masculine intonations. She was speaking of early days, before Spragge's Canyon had begun to bloom and blossom.

"I helped Mr. Spragge build fence. We cut down the white oaks, sawed 'em up the right length, and split out the posts with giant powder. We dug the holes, charred the posts, and hauled 'em with horse and chain. Then we stretched the wire. We'd never handled barb-wire. It jest cut our hands terr'bly. But we done it. Two years' job, it was."

Uncle Zed looked triumphantly at Hazel, addressing her in a loud voice.

"What you think o' that?"

"Wonderful!" murmured Hazel.

But it struck her that the real wonder lay in this periodic repetition which wearied neither speaker nor listener. Upon such rare occasions as the present, the old stories were retold in probably precisely the same words and nearly always to the same sympathetic audience.

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George observed with enthusiasm:

"Maw was the equal of any hired man in them days."

Mrs. Spragge said modestly:

"Mr. Spragge allowed I was better than any Greaser. There wan't other help to be got then."

II

While the women were clearing up the men fell asleep upon the front porch. Hazel slipped away to her room to read the letter which Uncle Zed brought from Aguila.

"Stocker's Landing, June 29.

"DEAR HAZEL:

"Just back after a fine trip up North. I took in Seattle and Tacoma. Both cities are booming and I've established connections which may lead to big business. Of course, it means more trips and more time spent away from you, but if I hadn't snapped up these chances some other fellow would. All in all, I'm feeling first rate, but terribly disappointed because I can't talk things over with you.

"Your aunt gave me your address and hinted that she was expecting you back soon. It beats me why you left Oakland so suddenly. And whatever can you find to entertain you in the wilds of a cow county?

"This is a short letter, dear, but I have to dig deep into a pile of accumulated correspondence.

"Very sincerely,

"WILBUR P. STOCKER.

"P.S.—I've half a notion to fetch you home when you get full up with hayseed."

She could hear Wilbur speaking; and she could see him "digging" into a pile of business letters high as Mount Tamalpais. At this very moment he might be

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sucking a soda-mint lozenge! Upon his thin nose were a pair of rimless pince-nez; his dark hair, getting thin on the top, was sleekly brushed back from a high, narrow forehead. Upon his upper lip was a small, carefully trimmed mustache, which he stroked complacently when he was feeling "first rate."

Of course poor Wilbur was not first rate.

Hazel had always known this, comparing him with men whom she had met in San Francisco, men whose orbit crossed hers very rarely. It says something for the girl's cleverness that she recognized her limitations, and was not unduly dismayed by them. She looked romantic, a creature attuned to sentiment, capable, perhaps, of a great passion, but beneath a charming surface she was practical and sensible. Her future as the wife of Wilbur was too easily visualized. Wilbur, it has been said, happened to be the most eligible of the men who might be reckoned as possible suitors. Unhappily, he was a type. There were thousands of Wilburs upon the Pacific Slope actively concerned with the development of California, bees busy in collecting honey to be hived for the consumption of others. Hazel knew, also, that she was a type. There were dozens of girls in Oakland like her, all of them destined to marry Wilburs.

This knowledge smote her.

And, because Wilbur and she were true to type, she had wit enough to admit that George attracted her because he was not a type, not a more or less finished product of Western arts and crafts! Rough, red clay—yes!—clay plastic to the hand of a potter! Not a white, smirking plaster of Paris manikin, on offer everywhere!

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Wilbur was disappointed because he could not talk over his affairs with a sympathetic listener. Naturally. But he was not disposed to take advice in regard to the conduct of these affairs. He would mind his own business admirably, pile up the dollars slowly and surely; and expect her to mind her business as faithfully. Marriage with Wilbur would be a business arrangement, absolutely satisfactory from a business point of view.

Marriage with George might mean bankruptcy.

Being a daughter of the West she was not prejudiced against him because he used the dialect of the foothills. So her father had spoken. She never doubted her ability to change him outwardly, to mold him to the approved Oakland pattern. She believed, also, that she could tear him from his beloved ranch. She could not help smiling when she recalled to mind Mrs. Spragge's talk at dinner. The old lady had been clever, but not quite clever enough. She had wished to show her guest what ranch life meant, and she had succeeded. But the result——? The never-ending prattle about unimportant matters, the tedious recital of an immense expenditure of time and labor to secure so little, the abounding disappointments, the desperate struggle against disgusting diseases (a plague of ticks! Heavens!), the impending catastrophe of a dry season, or destructive, torrential rains—all these things in their sum confirmed—as George's mother had intended they should—her conviction that life in Spragge's Canyon was quite unthinkable for Miss Hazel Goodrich. Unhappily, it fortified, also, her determination to lure George from his ranch, and to make of him a glorified husband and citizen, recognizable by the elect as a masterpiece fashioned by an

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American woman. In her mind's eye flashed two images, statues of George *before* and *after* sculpting.

The God whom she worshiped in the First Presbyterian Church of Oakland had in His wisdom assigned to her this grand task!

Comically enough, instinct, at this crisis of her life, triumphed over reason. She wanted George instinctively. In the cold light of reason he was not so desirable as a husband. Reason told her that George was not easy to mold and change.

She wanted George, and she meant to have him.

In this spirit she answered Mr. Stocker's letter.

"Spragge's Canyon, Aguila, San Lorenzo Co., July 1.

"DEAR WILBUR:—Don't worry! I am being well entertained by good, kind friends. Also, I have had misadventures. It is a great mistake to think that ranch-life is dull. It *is* dull for the ranchers, not for their visitors. I have been in peril of my life. Thrilling!

"It may interest you to learn that I'm taking lessons in the art of breathing deep and good. And the air here is fine. It blows the dust out of one's mind and clears the vision amazingly. I seem to see myself, and you, and others with what Clinton Tarrant used to call 'sharp definition' . . ."

Hazel paused, biting the end of her pen. She had forgotten Clinton Tarrant, who once had loomed large above her horizon. Tarrant was of the faculty at Berkeley University, an enthusiastic teacher of ardent youth. Hazel might have become Mrs. Tarrant. Then she would have shrunk into a negligible personality as Tarrant's wife. Berkeley would have gobbled her up. In her heart she disliked and feared university folk, and university talk, which floated above her pretty head.

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These professors revolved endlessly in a circle, stars of the smallest magnitude, unknown for the most part even in San Francisco. Nevertheless she owed something to Clinton Tarrant. He had revealed himself with sharp definition as a man to whom part of life was greater than the whole. She might have owned a one-third interest in Tarrant, not more.

Hazel continued her letter.

"We will talk over your affairs when we meet. Don't waste valuable time by coming down here. I can assure you that there are no business connections to be worked up in Spragge's Canyon. This is life at first hand, amusingly primitive and, up to a point, invigorating. You will see me soon.

"Cordially,

"HAZEL."

She folded the letter and slipped it into an envelope. Then she went down stairs with the intention of asking Uncle Zed to post it. Wilbur would be flattered at her promptness, nothing appealed to him more.

Meanwhile Uncle Zed and George had finished their siesta and were smoking amicably. Twice Uncle Zed had announced his intention of going, but he had not yet budged from his comfortable chair. George guessed that something was incubating in the old man's mind. He wanted to apologize for certain uncalled for remarks concerning city madams. It would be kind to help him out of a tight place.

"You and Miss Goodrich cottoned to each other—eh?"

Uncle Zed admitted this candidly.

"Yas. She's smarter than I reckoned fer. A slick

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talker, an' quite the lady. Handy around the house, too. That soup was to the Queen's taste, but I reckon there was overly much cream in it. Too—*rich*. Now, look ye here, George, I'll own up, as you want me ter do, that I was mistook about Miss Goodrich. She is a credit to Oakland, or any other doggoned city. But I wan't mistook about the main proposition. She'll never trot squar in double harness with you. Hev no truck with her."

George laughed scornfully.

"Put it this way! A lady like Miss Goodrich ain't likely ter hev truck with me."

"I dunno," replied Uncle Zed, thoughtfully. "It gives me cramps to hear any man shootin' off his mouth about what womenfolk will do or won't do. They take the wildest notions. Never cared to drive mares on the wheel. I was watchin' her clost at dinner. She's sorter stuck on you, same as poor Samanthy. Gosh! It's tough on Samanthy. I'm not blamin' ye any. Yer a fine, upstandin' colt, a credit to yer dam, and a credit to the State. I hate to say it to yer face, because yer in danger of swelled head, but it's a solid fact that I do cotton to this yere city madam because she cottons to you. City ways hain't blinded her to what is a man. I allow yer a man from the ground up. I allow also that yer considerable of a fool, with mighty leetle experience of women. What ye know about horses oughter hev learned you something. Teams matched together in looks never did impose on me. I've allers hunted fer sim'lar get up and get thar qualities, sim'lar stayin' powers. That's what makes a fine match team, my son. That's the sort o' team I like to handle on the last an' longest stretch o' road . . ."

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Hazel appeared smiling. She had overheard a few words.

"Talking of horses?" she asked.

"Yes, marm. And a man as knows horses knows human natur, too."

"Will you be kind enough to post this letter in Aguila?"

"Cert'ny."

After he had gone Hazel found herself alone with George. The wrinkles traced by Uncle Zed upon a smooth forehead had not yet vanished. Hazel said softly:

"Uncle Zed does not quite approve of me, does he?"
George hastened to reassure her.

"He likes you fine, only——!"

"Only——what?"

"Nothing! Gee! I've got to cut an abscess outer one of our calves!"

He vanished swiftly.

III

Upon Monday afternoon George drove Hazel into Aguila to secure guests for a Fourth of July barbecue. The hamlet slumbered peacefully upon the banks of a creek, marked on the county map by the significant name—Arroyo Seco. Heavy winter rains had deepened the channel during the memory of Mrs. Spragge. A small hotel, opposite to the wooden bridge spanning the creek, was kept by an Irishman who had crawled into Aguila some forty years before to die of galloping consumption. He had not died. In time he became a strong

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man. But he had never left Aguila. George wanted Hazel to talk with Patrick Hennessey. Pat could sing a *benedicite*, a psalm of thanksgiving, with Hibernian enthusiasm and conviction. And the happy thought had come to him during the previous night that the store-keeper's wife, Mrs. Geldenheimer, had been a city madam. Adolf Geldenheimer, of course, was a Sheeny, although a good little fellow in his way. Mrs. Geldenheimer might be company for Hazel. She lived in style. Her parlor was elegantly furnished. She wore fashionable gowns. She played the piano. Then there was Mrs. Bungard, the prim wife of the druggist and school teacher. Mrs. Bungard was an expert in shell-work and penmanship. The demand for drugs in and about Aguila being small, Mrs. Bungard sold in addition stationery, fancy needlework, and candy. Her husband, honorably styled "the Perfessor," inspired much respect as the *arbiter elegantiarum* of Aguila, the supreme authority upon all matters of etiquette and decorum.

"Nice little burg," said George, as they rattled over the bridge.

Nice!

Hazel smiled faintly at a double row of board-and-batten shacks, standing in more or less untidy gardens, and bordering a road thick with dust and pitted with chuck-holes. Being Monday, the village washing was in evidence. Tell-tale garments, eloquent of poverty and makeshift necessity, fluttered in the breeze. Some were fashioned out of old flour sacks. Obviously, there were many children in Aguila, the poor man's crop that never fails! Their underclothing was of finer quality, so Hazel noticed, and she wondered whether the making and put-

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ting on of these gave to the hard-working mothers the greatest pleasure that they knew.

In front of Hennessey's hotel half a dozen cow-ponies were hitched to a rail, whilst their riders made merry at the bar within. The ponies stood in a dismal line, hunched up, with drooping heads and tails tightly tucked against their thin quarters. A six-horse wagon stood opposite Geldenheimer's store. The owner was busy loading it up with sacks and cased goods, provisions for fall and winter. Upon the box seat sat a woman, holding her baby to her breast. A child might have doubted whether she could belong to the same sex as Hazel. Her dull, listless eyes met the glance at the young girl. For a moment the two women stared interrogatively at each other. Then the mother, not Hazel, smiled derisively, as if to say: "Yes—I was young once and pretty. You may grow, my dear, to look like me, if you marry a granger."

As they passed the wagon, Hazel whispered: "Who is that woman?"

George glanced at her indifferently. He had seen many such jaded specimens.

"I dunno. A squatter's wife. They come in from way-back to buy grub."

"Is there a place more 'way-back than this?"

"Is there? I should smile! Why, I know ranches seventy miles off on the plains t'other side o' the Coast Range, whar they don't see a strange face onct in six months. Must be kind o' lonesome."

"Very," answered Hazel.

"That's the dance hall," said George, pointing with

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his whip at a better class of building next to Geldenheimer's store.

"Oh! They dance here, do they?"

George explained, not too willingly:

"We did hev fine times. Adolf Geldenheimer and old man Hennessey put up that hall, and it paid good dividends. Two years ago we hed a big revival in Aguila. Some of us got the awfullest dose o' religion. The most o' the boys, and all the girls swore off dancin' fer a spell, and Adolf got no dividends. But the fever's dyin' out."

He drew rein at the livery stable, and helped Hazel to alight. Her appearance caused a mild sensation, for she carried a bright red sunshade, challenging attention and criticism.

On foot, they passed Hennessey's saloon. George called Hazel's attention to a telegraph post, saying gaily:

"See that post! It saved a man's life onct."

"How?"

"A cowboy bolted out o' them swing doors. Another feller was after him wavin' a big six-shooter. They was both plum full o' the old man's whiskey. The cowboy dodged behind that ther post and the other feller put jest six bullets into it. They're in the post still. I joshed the man as fired the six shots, because he fancied himself some as a shootist, but he said to me: 'By Ging! George, the son of a gun jest—*shrunk!*' Funny, eh?"

"You don't mean to say that was all. Wasn't the man arrested for attempted murder?"

"Why, no. The boys was on a bender."

"George, you wouldn't shoot at a fellow-creature?"

"I would if I hed to, mighty quick."

Hazel compressed her pretty lips. She perceived that

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argument would be wasted. Her silence, however, failed to impress her companion. He nudged her arm.

"That's the school house. We're mighty proud o' that."

It was an appalling building! Badly designed, badly built, badly painted, without porches to keep out the blazing sun, hot as an oven in summer, cold as charity in winter.

"Cost more'n five thousand dollars," said George.

Hazel was shrewd enough to inquire how such a sum was raised in such a tiny village. George grinned.

"The Aguila Rancho paid the most o' the bill. The old man kicked like a steer, but the folks in Aguila voted solid."

"I can understand," said Hazel dryly, "why he spends so little time among such neighbors."

"They're all right. Wait till you get acquainted with 'em. I hope we shall find Mis' Geldenheimer to home. She was raised in San José. Mis' Bungard come from New England, a bit pernicky an' peevish she is, married the Perfessor latish in life, no children. Folks say she thinks more of her cat than she does of the Perfessor. They're a kinky pair, but high-toned."

At the store, where Geldenheimer was duly presented to Miss Goodrich, they learned that Mrs. Geldenheimer was at home, and quite ready to entertain visitors. The Geldenheimer "residence" stood back from the road, surrounded by a small garden full of roses. Roses bloomed in profusion everywhere. A magnificent *Gold of Ophir*, carrying at least a thousand blossoms, wandered at will over the porch. Hazel was able to exclaim:

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"This garden is lovely; it smells too sweet for anything."

But outside lay the abomination of desolation. The undulating, uninteresting hills sloping gently to each side of the creek were bare of vegetation and burnt brown by the sun. Scrub-oaks were dotted about. Cattle stood patiently beneath the stunted boughs. At the end of the narrow valley shimmered the ocean.

Mrs. Geldenheimer opened the door and smiled when she greeted George, leading the way into a small parlor exotically upholstered in orange plush.

"Please be seated," she chirped. "I must apologize for my appearance. I wasn't expecting visitors, but they're heartily welcome."

She was a plump little woman, exuberantly alive.

"Miss Goodrich is from Oakland," said George.

Instantly Mrs. Geldenheimer burst into vivacious talk of cities. She loved theaters; she loved receptions; she loved life and movement; she loved restaurants. Hazel listened to her excited prattle, supplying the *lacuna* in the text. She perceived that Mrs. Geldenheimer had been pretty. But she had run shockingly to seed. And everything in the parlor was eloquent of an attempt to create an urban atmosphere, each eager word indicated poignantly an inordinate appetite for pleasures now unattainable. When she paused, almost breathless, George said politely:

"How's Isidore and Rachel?"

"They're at school in San José."

George appeared confounded.

"What's the matter with our school house?"

Mrs. Geldenheimer laughed. Evidently she possessed

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a sense of humor. Evidently, also, she was too kind-hearted to hurt George's feelings. Smilingly evasive, she glanced at Hazel, saying quietly:

"Perhaps Miss Goodrich can answer that question."

"Everything!" said Hazel.

"Thank you," murmured Mrs. Geldenheimer.

"Gee!" exclaimed George.

Hazel and he stayed half an hour, being constrained to swallow some brandied peaches, some rich fruit-cake, and some very sweet lemonade. Amply nourished, they took leave of Mrs. Geldenheimer, who promised to assist at the barbecue.

"I've done most of the talking," she said deprecatingly, "but, oh, dear! hasn't it been a blessed relief?"

"I've felt like that," remarked George, "after a good spell o' hard swearin'."

Hazel and he strolled into the drug store. Mrs. Bungard received them. After introducing Hazel, George repeated his formula.

"Miss Goodrich is from Oakland."

Mrs. Bungard smiled acidly:

"I was born and educated in Massachusetts."

A door gave access to a sitting-room, furnished austere. Upon the well-scrubbed pine floor lay a rag-carpet. A redwood bookcase held many plainly bound books. Above the chimney-piece hung a framed specimen of penmanship. Near the window stood a round table encrusted with shells. A large family bible flanked a bouquet of wax flowers enclosed in an old-fashioned bell-glass. All the chairs were of wood, not upholstered. Plain muslin curtains hung stiffly upon each side of the

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window, and the blind was drawn down to exclude sun and flies.

Hazel was in New England.

And she knew it. This thin, melancholy, austere woman had established her atmosphere, unquestionably because wisely she desired little.

Mrs. Bungard did not burst into voluble talk. She closed her thin lips and waited, almost aggressively, for her visitor to select a theme. Hazel did so.

"Is there a church here?" she asked, in her pleasant voice.

"There is not, Miss Goodrich. Most of my neighbors are Pagans. I grieve to say it, but it's true."

George began to look uncomfortable.

"It is always so," continued Mrs. Bungard, "when you find a climate such as this."

"Roses and sunshine," suggested Hazel, "make a Heaven on earth. You mean that?"

Mrs. Bungard nodded. George said explosively:

"Must be H——ll without 'em."

Mrs. Bungard looked unaffectedly shocked, but she retorted tartly:

"It may be Hell with them, George Spragge."

"Wal," said George, good-naturedly, "our ranch is Heaven to me. We want you to come to a barbecue, Mis' Bungard. Fourth o' July. You and the Perfessor. Mr. and Mis' Geldenheimer will be along, and Uncle Zed Byles."

"I thank you, Mr. Spragge. We have no engagement; we shall be pleased to accept your invitation."

"Good!" said George. He named time and place and

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then looked wistfully at his hat, which Mrs. Bungard had hung upon a peg. Hazel began again:

"Professor Bungard teaches school?"

"Yes; he does his best with his scholars. At times he gets discouraged. I taught school before the Aguila school house was built. My scholars taught me more than I taught them."

"I was one o' Mis' Bungard's scholars," said George. "She's waled me many a time."

"I did my duty," replied the ex-schoolmarm.

"Deserved all my lickin's an' more, too," said George magnanimously. "We must be gittin' along, Miss Goodrich."

Mrs. Bungard murmured lifelessly:

"Please call again."

"What a woman!" exclaimed Hazel, as they walked toward the hotel.

George replied solemnly:

"Her pore heart was froze up when she was young. She thinks that Satan sent the roses an' the sunshine. Now, we'll hev a cocktail."

"A—cocktail?"

"Meanin' a howdy with old man Hennessey. I kep' him till the last. You jest ask him what he thinks o' this part o' Californy."

They entered the hotel by the side door. From the saloon on the ground floor came uproarious laughter, and the sound of voices raised in song.

"Some o' the boys is celebratin'," observed George. "Them two teamsters from acrost the Range air makin' the most o' their oppoortoonities. It's the last chance for them, by thunder."

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He left the young lady in the dining-room and went in search of Patrick Hennessey. By this time Hazel was feeling profoundly depressed, and the sight of six small tables covered with dirty oil-cloth and adorned with thick glass and thicker crockery failed to raise her spirits. She told herself that she needed a cocktail.

Hennessey appeared. Assuredly Pat had kissed the Blarney stone in his youth, although a once rich brogue had become attenuated. He had heard the village gossip. He knew that George was contemplating marriage with a city madam. Hazel beheld a small, thick-set octogenarian, white-haired, red-skinned, and the owner of two sparkling blue eyes. George invited him to the bar-becue, adding:

"We jest mean to hev a hog-killin' time."

"Be Gob! I'll be wid ye," said Hennessey.

"And now," said George, "you start right in an' tell Miss Goodrich what you think o' this section o' San Lorenzy county. Would you leave it to be made king of Ireland?"

The ancient chuckled and let himself go. It would be futile to record what he said because his manner of saying it is indescribable. He insisted upon drinks, served by a bartender with a flaming complexion. Hazel chose lemonade. George, under compulsion, drank whiskey. The old man delivered a panegyric, which, from innumerable repetitions, flowed fluently from his lips. He owed life, happiness and prosperity to Aguila. He concluded on a top note——

"Glory be to God and God's country!"

His sincerity, his joy in life after fourscore years

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of it, affected George. The young man interpolated such remarks as these:

"Gosh! I feel that-a-way," or, with smacking of thighs: "That's me," or, with gusty laughter: "Yer dead right, old man."

When everything that could be said had been repeated at least three times Hazel murmured softly:

"It seems to be a wonderful place for—men."

IV

Driving back to the ranch George spoke with some irritation of the Geldenheimers. Why had Isidore and Rachel been despatched to San José? The "Perfessor" was on to his job. What ailed these Sheenies? Was they better 'n other folks? Then he remembered suddenly that Hazel, his Hazel, had spoken slightly of the five-thousand-dollar schoolhouse. He said sharply:

"What's the matter with our schoolhouse?"

Hazel hesitated. Dared she speak out? The difficulty of sharing her point of view with George provoked a curious sex antagonism. She wanted George more than ever, but she wanted his mind and soul together with his splendid body. How could she "get at" these? What spell could she cast? For a spell was needed. Argument would be fatuous. She writhed in spirit, because she had tried argument with Clinton Tarrant and Wilbur Stocker. And the victory had been with them. It would be hopeless to tell George what he really wanted, because he would retort with odious and invincible obstinacy that he knew what he wanted much better than she did. They would wander round and round a vicious circle. Finally,

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inspiration descended upon her. Never in all her life had she experimented with a woman's most subtle weapon—self-depreciation. Since childhood she had exhibited a joyous and virginal assurance, peculiarly the attribute of the Western girl who has never left the West. No heaven-anointed monarch is more self-conscious of his divine right to impose his ideals upon others than the daughter of the Golden State who has graduated with honors from her local high school. Charles Dana Gibson has drawn her to the life, exclaiming "Fore" to all the world.

"I am only a girl," murmured Hazel.

George turned sharply. The unexpectedness of the reply disarmed him. He said eagerly:

"Yer the sweetest and cleverest girl I ever struck. 'Spose I said I was only a man, only a hayseed. I ain't above askin' for information. You kin teach me lots. Now, sail in!"

Hazel felt that at last she was indeed breathing deep and good. George responded in the right spirit. His breezy confidence in the girl he loved wafted her high above all clouds.

"I just hate talking *at* you instead of with you."

"You go ahead—full steam. I kin stand anything from you."

"In my eyes," said Hazel, very sweetly, "your school-house stands for what I most despise in our State. It's indecently pretentious. It reminds me of our marble steps. When we went into the Geldenheimers' I saw some antlers."

"Blacktail's horns. I gave 'em to Mis' Geldenheimer."

"They were gilded and mounted upon a plush plaque."

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George nodded.

"Did *you* have them gilded?"

"Not much! Adolf Geldenheimer did that. He told me they looked 'dressy'."

"So does the schoolhouse, with its ridiculous tower and cupola. The children here would be better off in a big adobe with thick walls and wide porches."

"That's so."

Hazel went on, more and more at her ease.

"I admire the Jews because they do try to get the best. I've not met Mr. Bungard, but I saw his photograph in the parlor. He looks something like his wife—a thin, soured, stunted specimen, full of fads and prejudice. Is Mrs. Geldenheimer very fond of her children?"

"She is that. Jest worships 'em."

"Ah! And, at whatever cost to her, she sends them away because she wants them to have a more liberal education than Mr. Bungard can give them."

"I reckon that must be so. By gum! it is so!"

"I can understand," continued Hazel, in her most melting accents, "what it must mean to a devoted mother to live in Aguila without children."

"All the same," replied George stoutly, "what's good enough fer Adolf and her oughter be good enough fer the kids."

"Is that your honest conviction?"

"I—I think so," but he wriggled.

"Let me put it differently. Do you think that the highest love measures itself in that way?"

He looked puzzled. Boldly, Hazel put him to the supreme test.

"You love me?"

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With uplifted, warning finger, with a smile upon her face, although her heart was throbbing, she enjoined a temperate answer.

"You rushed things before," she whispered. "Don't rush them now. I am quite sure that you love me. I am quite sure that you would make sacrifices for my sake——"

"Sacrifices?"

"You would try to give me things I wanted. You would not think that what was good enough for you was necessarily good enough for me."

"By God! I do feel that way. I'd give you anything. I said so before. I say it again. Sacrifices? Why, I'd offer up my pinto saddle horse, an' set alight the barn, if that would help you any!"

"It's very sweet to hear that, George. And I have to ask myself—what sacrifices can I make for such a man?"

"But I don't want you to make any, not a one."

Hazel blushed. She was about to sacrifice her delicacy. Her face flamed as she whispered:

"I am not as unselfish as Mrs. Geldenheimer. I could not send my children away from me. And yet I should loathe the idea of sending them to your schoolhouse to be taught by a man who gets discouraged."

There was silence. The work had been done, and well done. Presently she heard George's voice. He called her by her first name for the first time.

"Hazel?"

She looked at him. He was transfigured. She realized that he had reached a height immeasurably above her. Her words had exercised some amazing refining influence, touching him to the supreme issues of life and

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love. It thrilled her to think that she had done this, transmuted clay into porcelain. Such a triumph adumbrated further triumphs, immense possibilities.

"Yes, George."

His voice trembled, as he whispered:

"I seemed to see our children. Mebbe the boys'll be a mite like me, but the girls'll take after you—sure!"

Boys! Girls!

Her heart grew cold again. If he had spoken of one child! She had used the plural, conceding to probability one boy and one girl. Numbers appalled her. Many children would drain vitality and joy from her. She contrasted her own physique with that of Mrs. Spragge. Unable to speak, she held up a silencing finger. George said hastily:

"I *am* rushing things. Forgive me, Hazel."

"Of course."

He tried to see the future from her point of view.

"If our schoolhouse ain't good enough fer them little Sheenies, it ain't good enough fer yer children."

She smiled faintly.

"Ah! And do you think that I could separate myself from my own children?"

"Mebbe not."

Skilfully, she followed up her advantage.

"And do you think that I could leave the man I loved, as some women do?"

"I reckon he'd hev something ter say 'bout that."

She could see that he was profoundly troubled and moved.

CHAPTER IX

A BRUSH FIRE

I

UPON the day before the national holiday, the tide happened to be exceptionally low. George and Hazel explored an outlying reef in the hope of finding *abalones*. Under some wet kelp, Hazel discovered an immense shell which George promised to polish for her. He set about this congenial task with his usual promptness and energy, Hazel turning the grindstone, while George held the shell against it. The process takes time, and lends itself to desultory conversation. When rough-and-ready attrition had removed the ugly exterior, George fetched acid and pumice stone. Slowly the shell began to reveal the most exquisite iridescent tints, becoming a thing of real beauty. Hazel was charmed, but she could not resist the temptation to apply this pretty object lesson to herself and her companion. When he presented the polished specimen, she thanked him demurely, saying:

"I should like to do that to you."

"Hold my nose to the grindstone?"

"Bring out all the iridescence in you."

"Slick me up, you mean?"

She nodded, smiling at him. Yes; he was her *abalone*. She had discovered him, seen beneath a rough, encrusted

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surface, which the pumice of tact could remove, revealing unexpected beauties. Much to her delight, George "played up."

"You kin do what you please with me, dear."

He gazed at her with unabashed devotion, likely to express itself in overwhelming speech. She said hastily:

"That's it. It would *please* me."

"It pleased Mis' Van Horne to buy me that outfit o' clothes."

"Clothes don't matter much to men," replied Hazel, "but the mind must be kept bright and polished. I don't think Mrs. Bungard did her duty by you, George."

"I use ter sass her considerable. Pore old hen! She couldn't inspire love in her scholars—see?"

"Perhaps not."

"That's jest whar you've the bulge."

Blushing, she diverted the talk.

"Any plans for this afternoon?"

"We kin fish from the rocks, if you feel like it. Rock-cod and smelts. Mebbe a big tussle with a conger. Or the pompano might be running."

"I shall love it, if I'm not keeping you from your work."

"Pshaw! It's a fact all the same that yer the first woman as ever did keep me from my work."

"It will be heavenly on the rocks."

"You bet!"

She held up a warning finger. He was quick enough to understand her instantly.

"I'll be good," he promised. "An' if I git too warm, I kin jump into the sea and cool off."

She laughed joyously, captivated by his passion for

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her, and by her ability to control it. George laughed with her, thinking how pretty she was, and growing prettier on his ranch, prettier and stronger and more womanly. But he frowned as he stared at the shell in her hand.

"I suppose," he said slowly, "that I *am* like that ther *abalone*. Anyways, I freeze on tight to my rocks. Say, did you notice that you wasn't strong enough ter pull it off?"

"Why, yes."

"Chinamen hunt fer 'em, and dry the meat. Once, a feller got his fingers pinched. The tide rose and drowned him."

"What?"

"It's a cold fact. Happened off Point Lobos."

"How horrible!"

"One Chinees more or less don't matter. He shouldn't hev monkeyed with what he didn't sabee. Gee! Thar's Maw beckonin' to us. It's time fer dinner."

Hazel hurried upstairs to wash her hands. She placed the shell upon her dressing-table, deciding that it would hold pins and hairpins; but she could not wean her thoughts from the Chinaman slowly and inexorably submerged. If she were not strong enough to tear George from his rocks——

II

After the midday meal, George busied himself with his fishing gear. They were about to start for the rocks below the condor's eyrie when a neighbor galloped up. Hazel overheard a few words which seemed to have a galvanizing effect upon George. The neighbor left as swiftly as he had come.

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"Brush fire," said George. "I must go help."

"Can I go, too?"

"If you like."

"How exciting!"

"Excitin'? You bet! if the trade starts a-blowin' good an' hard, the fire may sweep Aguila off the earth!"

"Oh!"

"Every man'll turn out. I'll hitch up the buggy."

He did so without wasting a precious second. As they raced over the rough road, George sat silent, with frowning brows and compressed lips. The trade was blowing and increasing in strength. As soon as they topped the divide, George pointed his whip at a distant pillar of smoke, rising high into the sky, and flanked by low banks of blacker smoke.

"They can't put out that," said Hazel.

"They'll light a back-fire."

Soon afterwards they could hear the roar of the flames, and the crackling of the dry chaparral as the fire licked it up. A long way in front of the fire was a line of men.

George hitched the buggy to the road fence, and helped Hazel to descend.

"It'll be a tough fight," he muttered.

He took his place in the line, armed with a wet gunny-sack and plenty of matches. Hazel looked on.

The back-fire burnt slowly against the westerly breeze. It tried, of course, to burn with the wind; and it was each man's business to prevent this, for a back-fire out of control may prove more disastrous than the original conflagration.

Hazel was quick to perceive the object upon which the

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workers were concentrating their energies. Already a long strip of burnt ground lay between them and the approaching tide of destruction, but that strip was neither wide enough nor long enough.

George worked desperately, lighting tiny fires, allowing each fire to increase up to a certain point, and then extinguishing it on the eastern side by beating out the flames with his gunny-sack. He darted hither and thither, the impersonation of activity and energy. Hazel realized that he took greater "chances" than the other men, relying upon his superior strength and agility. She wondered if she could help. Two or three other women were carrying wet gunny-sacks to the men. Hazel joined them. She dipped a sack into a bucket of water, let it soak for an instant, and then carried it dripping to George.

"Wind's stronger," he growled.

The smoke from the original fire drifted down wind, making Hazel choke, and filling her eyes with tears. Sparks came with that acrid smoke, falling into the dry grass behind the fighting line.

"You watch out fer them sparks," shouted George.

Hazel obeyed, breathless with excitement. The lust of battle assailed her, as the enemy crept closer and closer. Fortunately, the fire was still confined to the sage brush and chaparral, which burned fiercely but slowly. Such a fire in a bunch-grass pasture, with a strong wind behind it, would have raced on with overpowering speed, leaping all obstacles such as roads or rivers.

Gradually the scene became weirdly grotesque. In and out of the smoke and flames danced fifty men, black

Spragge's Canyon

from head to foot. The deadly sparks, the shrapnel more to be dreaded than the advancing waves of fire, fell thickly beyond the strip of burnt ground. To extinguish these promptly every energy of body and mind came into active play. Garments were torn off and flung upon smouldering spots, picked up again and flung down elsewhere.

Pat Hennessey arrived with a spring wagon. He was too old to fight fire, but he mixed gallons of weak whiskey and water, which the women carried in pails to the thirst-tormented demons dancing among the flames.

Hazel's imagination blazed as fiercely as the chaparral. Yes; this was an experience common to all foothill folk, one of Nature's scourges, the flail of Fate, threshing hope and faith and charity from the hearts of men. If those sparks prevailed, nothing could save Aguila and the little homes which encompassed the hamlet. Within an hour, what would be left by a few charred scrub-oaks, and smouldering piles of rubbish? The strenuous work of two generations obliterated!

Hazel remained near George, supplying him with wet sacks. She noticed that he refused the pannikin of whiskey and water, which one of the men tendered him. His amazing energy seemed to radiate from him, inciting the other workers to fresh activity. He shouted at them, and they responded hoarsely.

"George," she said, "you're killing yourself."

He laughed. Derisive amusement seemed to flash from his white teeth and blue eyes.

"We'll win out."

They did. The memory of previous victories sustained them; each man had fought fire at least a score of

A Brush Fire

times. At the critical moment the children came running from the schoolhouse, boys and girls attacked the falling sparks with shouts of glee, Hazel was petrified with astonishment. Did everybody, except herself, regard this visitation of God as a—joke?

The advancing battalions met the strip of burnt ground, tried desperately to leap it, advanced again and again to the assault, and then surrendered.

The battle was over.

The villagers stood in groups talking and laughing. Some of the men were half-naked. Many were severely scorched. Out of the smoke-begrimed faces shone blood-shot eyes still aglow with the light of victory.

"I'll have a big drink now," said George.

"George fit like a tiger," remarked one of the men.

As the excitement died down, the sense of danger seemed to evaporate with it. Mr. Bungard stalked among his scholars, ordering them peremptorily to the schoolhouse.

"You've had your recess," he remarked grimly.

George turned to Hazel:

"Time to catch a big rock-cod yet."

"Oh, George!"

"I mean it. Let's pull outer this! Gee! Yer pretty clothes is ruined."

"I don't care. It was—grand."

III

An hour later they were calmly fishing as if nothing had happened. The tide swirled among the rocks; the gulls and cormorants were diving into the clear waters; the sun shone out of cloudless skies.

Spragge's Canyon

Peace after war.

To the southwest a soft haze hung over the landscape, all that was left to remind Hazel of the fire. It softened delightfully the crude hard outlines of the dunes. The girl listened to the muffled thunder of the combers, thinking of the forces behind them, the blind forces ever ready to wreck and destroy. It happened that she had been absent from Oakland at the time of the great earthquake. But she had listened to a thousand stories of that awful catastrophe and the horrors of the fire following it.

George said little, disappointed because the fish were not biting. Only one rock-cod lay upon the rocks. He said abruptly:

"I feel like going in swimmin'."

"Please don't."

"Why not?"

"You might be drowned."

"What an idee!"

"This fire has scared me. Have you forgotten all about it already?"

"Why, yes. It's—out."

She made no reply, but, inwardly, she was amazed at his indifference, at his calm acceptance of perils constantly impending, and on occasion taking place. After a long pause she said slowly:

"If a fire swept your Canyon——?"

"Gee! Thar wouldn't be much left!"

"Are you fully insured?"

"One ain't never fully insured."

"Heavens! Doesn't it keep you awake, nights?"

He shrugged his shoulders, smiling pleasantly.

"We must take some chances."

A Brush Fire

Presently, in spite of her protests, he retired behind some rocks, undressed, and leapt into the sea. She watched his head, a dark speck upon the waters, and the white shoulders flashing in and out of the water. He swam far out till her soul sickened with terror. She thought to herself: "Oh! I do love him! If he sank before my eyes I should go mad."

A rock-cod engrossed her attention. He was a big fellow, and she handled him clumsily, eventually losing him, because the line was cut by a sharp reef. She stopped fishing, absorbed in thought, watching the head, now almost out of sight. His vigor and strength seemed to accentuate her own weakness. For the second time she began to doubt her power to mold this primal man according to the Oakland pattern.

She tried to behold herself as George's wife, the mother of his children, living on the ranch and for the ranch, a prey to terrors which such women as Mrs. Spragge and Samantha ignored. She reckoned up deliberately the "chances": drought, disease, fire!

Strangely humiliated, unable to cope with her own fears, and yet excited, ravaged by her emotions, knowing that life had become acutely interesting, she sat still, with her pretty hands folded upon her lap, waiting for George to come back.

IV

He looked attractively fresh and young after his long swim, as he told her that he was ravenously hungry.

"Fish ain't on the bite, but I am. Let's go eat something."

They returned to the ranch. George picked some ber-

Spragge's Canyon

ries, and returned from the kitchen with a plate piled high with newly baked cookies, and a jug of milk. They sat together in the shade of a cottonwood, with the creek bubbling at their feet. It was that pleasant hour in Southern California when the shadows begin to steal across the foothills, turning them from drab brown into lavender and rose. The cattle were wandering into the open pastures; the quail were calling. Looking up, Hazel could see the sensitive leaves of the cottonwood vibrating beneath the evening breeze, singing their vespers as the sun declined into the ocean.

"Bully, ain't it?" said George.

"Heavenly."

"You're jest lovin' it, Hazel, ain't ye?"

"Of course I love this. Who wouldn't? It's simply idyllic."

"What's that?"

She explained not quite so lucidly as usual, trying to indicate a pastoral charm necessarily fugitive and elusive, something to be touched, not firmly grasped by the dweller in cities. George was slightly puzzled. Every aspect of rural life delighted him.

"I supposed you liked fighting that awful fire?"

"Why, yes."

"And those other hateful things?"

"What things?"

"The dry years, that horrid plague of ticks! Ugh!"

He answered with heartless philosophy:

"After a dry season the rain is great! I've gone out many a time and stood in it, till I was soaked through and through. One wallers! Same feeling about campfires. I'd love to camp out with you. A man gets good

A Brush Fire

and tired, dog-weary, by Jing! Mebbe it's dark as pitch in the hills. More'n onct I've bin plum lost. And then one sees the camp-fire, jest a tiny spark in the night. Gee! That's immense!"

He drew in his breath, with a sigh of ineffable satisfaction, while she was thinking: "How little pleases him! How satisfied with what he has and is!"

George continued drawlingly:

"'Pears to me, Hazel, that we couldn't enjoy good times without bad times."

"Contrast colors life."

"Mighty slick—that. I slept fine after I came in last night, because——"

He stopped suddenly, with a smile curling his lips.

"Because?"

"I was out in the hills last night."

"Out in the hills? Why?"

"That's another secret."

He laughed gayly, but Hazel was piqued. Not to make a mystery of George's nocturnal wanderings, let it be recorded that he had spent many wakeful hours beside a deer-lick, because Hazel had expressed a wish to taste venison. George meant to surprise her, and had duly sworn Samantha and his mother to strict secrecy. Venison, moreover, was not quite in season, although the bucks in the Canyon were fat enough to kill. He intended to try again this same night, stealing out of the house when Hazel was fast asleep.

As she remained silent, he murmured slyly:

"Curious, air ye?"

"I am."

She spoke curtly, with a disdain wasted upon him.

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"Always ready to tell my secrets when you give me the nod!"

He hoped that she would smile, with the very slightest inclination of her head, but she looked down the narrow Canyon, sitting upright, with her lips primly pressed together.

"I must do my chores," said George.

V.

She sat on till it was dusk, wondering why George went into the hills at night. What could be the meaning of these extraordinary vigils?

As she mounted the stairs she saw Samantha entering her own room. Hazel followed Samantha into that small, austere chamber, and sat down upon the hard, narrow bed. Samantha slipped out of a nondescript garment, which she wore when milking, and hung it behind the door, while Hazel chattered about the fire.

"They said that George fought like a tiger."

"He would do that."

"Really and truly he seemed to like it."

"Dessay he did."

"I helped—a little."

Samantha nodded, as she began to wash her face and hands, scrubbing them thoroughly after a fashion which dismayed Hazel. She jumped up, protesting:

"You'll ruin your nice skin."

"With good soap and water?"

"Certainly. A little cooling cream to remove the dust——"

"Gracious! I should feel messy."

A Brush Fire

"You have such a nice white skin. It's your duty to take great care of it."

Samantha faced her suddenly. The redness of her cheeks may have been caused by the friction of a coarse towel.

"Why should I take care of it?"

Hazel replied discreetly:

"For its own sake. It makes me mad when we're accused of making ourselves look nice to please the men."

"But, don't we?"

"Certainly, I don't."

Samantha looked slightly incredulous as she continued her ablutions. Hazel described the fishing and George's long swim, ending carelessly:

"He'll sleep sound after all that, won't he?"

"I reckon George allers does."

"But he was in the hills last night."

"I want to know!"

"Didn't he tell you? What can take him there?"

"Search me," replied Samantha.

Hazel bit her lip, certain that Samantha could have answered the question had she chosen to do so. Feeling much exasperated, she went to her own room, soothing her ruffled feeling by making a careful toilette, designed possibly to provoke envy in Samantha rather than admiration in George.

At supper the family talked of the morrow's barbecue and the guests bidden to the feast. The fire, so Hazel remarked, was accepted as an incident of the past. Want of imagination prevented the Spraggles from considering what might have happened had the flames leapt the nar-

Spragge's Canyon

row obstacle between them and the village built of wood. Mrs. Spragge and Samantha, like George, had lost interest in the fire because it was out.

Throughout the meal Hazel felt that Fate was treating her ignobly, moving her hither and thither, as if she were a pawn upon a chessboard. It was appalling to reflect that she could not read her own mind, which seemed to change from hour to hour. She envied Mrs. Spragge, monumentally incapable of change, as solid as a part of the Canyon as the high cliffs upon its western boundary. She wondered whether she could ever achieve the placid silence of Samantha, or listen tolerantly to George when he fell to praising indiscriminately such very ordinary folk as the Bungards and Geldenheimers. Beneath the courtesies of the women, she perceived an amorphous hostility. One trained intelligence measured itself against three that were untrained. The numerical odds, however, did not daunt Hazel. Nor did the prospect of a fight dismay her. Mind, surely, would triumph over muscle. A victory would justify the money lavished upon her education.

CHAPTER X

THE BARBECUE

I

BELOW the bridge, where once Judge Lynch held court, about a hundred yards from the marsh, grew a big patch of willows through which the creek meandered. In the middle was George's barbecue ground. Long ago he had cut down a number of willows and rooted up their stumps. Result—a circle some thirty feet in diameter of smooth surface, hard as a threshing floor. The surrounding willows were trimmed so that the branches arched overhead. The sun was almost excluded, but a few rays found their way through the interlaced boughs, dappling the shade and producing an exquisite effect. Hard by bubbled the creek, singing its song before it degenerated into a stagnant slough. Ferns bordered the stream and watercress grew thickly green in the pools. Lower down were trenches for roasting the beef, and long spits of willow lay ready beside them. Upon the bare ground George had pegged a piece of canvas. The ladies of the party attended to everything else, except the roasting of the meat. That was held to be a man's business. George esteemed himself a master cook at this difficult art, having graduated under the tutelage of a Spanish-

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Californian, one of the pleasure-loving Latins who had vanished after the death of Don Juan Aguila.

Hazel watched the preparations for the feast with delighted interest. Early in the forenoon George prepared the furnace. By eleven o'clock a narrow pit was half full of glowing embers which furnished just the right amount of heat without any smoke. Upon the willow spits were impaled morsels of beef, each chunk being separated from its fellow by a piece of fat.

George wore his rough overalls and a well-washed blue flannel shirt open at the throat. The sleeves, rolled high above the elbow, displayed massive arms. His face glowed red as the embers in the pit. His blue eyes seemed to have absorbed tiny flames from the same source.

Hazel, who had taken a short course of Greek history, decided that Agamemnon must have looked like George.

Since their visit to the village, he had said nothing to Hazel which might reveal his thoughts. She knew that she had given him food for thought; and she perceived that he was chewing the cud of it with an exasperating deliberation common to men who have not an easy habit of speech. More, he had spent two nights, or part of two nights, away from home, and when she asked him where he had been and what he had been doing, he merely laughed and said as before:

"Gee! We air curious."

Meanwhile, love-making was suspended. Hazel was grateful for this. But each morning a trout was freshly caught for her breakfast and a rose was placed beside her plate. If only this handsome lover would gratify her curiosity as well as her palate!

The Barbecue

The vigils, let it be added, were spent in vain. The fat buck never came to the deer-lick.

The company assembled in good season. Mrs. Geldenheimer spoke for the other guests when she said to Hazel:

"I just love to smell the meat when it's roasting. It gives me the finest kind of appetite."

Pat Hennessey brought bottles of lager beer and claret, rough Zinfandel, the pure juice of the California grape, heady but pleasant to drink. These were placed carefully in the creek. Mrs. Bungard, wearing thread gloves and a drab colored gown, presented a box of butternut candy. Uncle Zed provided cigars. Mr. and Mrs. Adolf Geldenheimer shone conspicuous in new clothes rather too smart for the occasion. Adolf was as short and plump as his wife. Hazel, who had attended a Jewish wedding in Oakland, tried to picture Adolf as a bridegroom, vested with a white sheet, and wearing a tall silk hat. He carried a parcel of *delicatessen*, boned anchovies, liver-sausage and goose-breast. Mrs. Spragge did not quite approve of such "extras," but they were graciously accepted in the spirit with which they were offered. Adolf, greatly impressed by Miss Goodrich, prattled in his turn of city pleasures.

"My wife," he said confidentially, "was a Schwartz of San José. A daughter of Isidore Schwartz."

Hazel smiled, the name was familiar.

"Isidore Schwartz," repeated Adolf, with gusto. "You've read his ads in the papers. He's paid as high as three thousand dollars for a front page of some special edition."

"Oh, yes," said Hazel. She remembered that Isidore

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was head of the Garden City firm of Schwartz Brothers, Clothiers. She could recall some of the famous ads. "Do you want to dress in style? Call on Isidore, just back from Europe. He'll rig you out right. If you don't like his cut prices, say so, and he'll cut 'em a shade finer. Isidore wants *you!*"

Adolf became even more confidential.

"I worked for Schwartz Brothers. Isidore wasn't pleased when Rachel and me fixed it up to get married, but it tickled him to death when we named our boy after him. We're just pigging it at Aguila, but we shall win out."

"I'm sure you will," said Hazel.

She flitted from him to talk to Mrs. Bungard. She and the "Perfessor" sat together, smiling frostily. As soon as Mr. Bungard had been presented, his wife said to Hazel:

"You asked me last Monday if there was a church in Aguila. Are you a church member, Miss Goodrich?"

Hazel said that she belonged to the First Presbyterian Church of Oakland. Mrs. Bungard purred:

"I'm pleased to know that. This is your first visit to these parts? Yes. The Spragges are old-timers. George was a pupil of mine. Yes; we mentioned that on Monday. I never did get a real good hold of George, but he's a fine young man. He wants only one thing—religion."

Hazel said demurely:

"Isn't the ranch his religion?"

"You never spoke a truer word, Miss Goodrich. I'm interested in George. He doesn't drink, nor gamble; he's a good son."

The Barbecue

"Well fixed, too," observed Mr. Bungard gloomily. "It ain't easy to make money in these foothills, or to keep it. George Spragge, and his father before him, have prospered."

Adolf, unable to keep away from Hazel, joined in the talk.

"No hired help," he said with a gesture of his pudgy hands. "Hired help eats up the profits. The Spragges run the ranch, and they make money out of everything on it. George is a money maker."

Mrs. Bungard sniffed.

Hazel said carelessly:

"Do you think Mr. Spragge could make money off the ranch?"

What Adolf really thought will never be known. Naturally, he wished to make himself agreeable to the young lady who, presumably, was going to marry George. He replied warmly:

"Make money in Death Valley. *Anywheres!* It's a gift. I've got it, but then I'm a Jew. We keep our eyes peeled for small turnovers, so does George Spragge."

Hazel's eyes sparkled.

"I've always told him," continued Adolf, "that he ought to buy an interest in some big outside business—cattle, horses, hogs. Chances lyin' around for any man to pick up."

Hazel felt immensely uplifted. Adolf might look absurd in a white sheet and a silk hat, standing under a canopy, but in a grocery store nobody questioned his ability or, indeed, his honesty. Very soon he would move from Aguila to a small town, and thence on and

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on till he rived in prestige and wealth the tremendous Isidore Schwartz.

"You ought to tell Mr. Spragge that," murmured Hazel.

"I have."

The Professor observed mournfully:

"George Spragge is obstinate."

"Always was," added the ex-schoolmarm.

II

The reek of the roasting beef began to tickle agreeably the nostrils of the company. By this time a large tablecloth was spread, much after the fashion of modern picnics. Don Juan Aguila and his contemporaries scorned such accessories as forks, plates, tablecloths, and napkins. Mrs. Spragge and Uncle Zed even now preferred to eat with their fingers, and refused somewhat tartly boned anchovies and liver-sausage. Samantha went round with a bucket full of *chiles relenos*, green peppers stuffed with minced chicken and then fried in batter. Mrs. Spragge uncovered a huge jar of *salsa*, that pungent Spanish sauce cunningly compounded of tomatoes, onions and red peppers. With this adventitious aid immense quantities of barbecued beef would be consumed by the veterans.

Then George appeared with two long spits covered with smoking beef. The feast began.

Hazel told herself that it was Homeric, and said as much to Mr. Bungard, who alone of those present might be expected to appreciate the allusion. He looked less discouraged after tasting the *salsa*, but he and his wife

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ate sparingly, mindful of chronic dyspepsia, and casting disapproving glances at the Geldenheimers, who exhibited an almost criminal recklessness, consuming everything offered to them. The old Irishman, of course, was the life of the party, exchanging crusted jests with Uncle Zed and the Spragges. He affirmed that he was ready to go in bathing after the banquet. This was too much for Mrs. Bungard.

"A long time after," she remarked solemnly. "Three hours at least after eating such a meal as this."

Presently the talk soared into the condor's eyrie. Once more George was constrained to tell the story, punctuated by remarks from Samantha. She was wearing her white dress and looking her best, fired by a desire to rekindle sparks in George's breast, a forlorn hope truly!

"I'd like to see the nest," said Mrs. Geldenheimer.

"That's easy," replied George. "'Tain't more 'n half a mile away. We kin walk along the shore, but the cliff kind o' hangs over. Ye'll hev to climb some."

"I'm not much on the climb," said Mrs. Geldenheimer.

"I'll climb," announced Hazel.

"Kin you?" asked Samantha sharply.

Her eyes flashed an odd defiance. Hazel realized that this was a challenge.

"I can," she replied quietly, "and I shall."

"I'll take keer of ye," said George.

Everybody smiled discreetly, except poor Samantha.

In due time the banquet came to an end. It was agreed that the national fête had been fittingly celebrated. The "Perfessor" was called upon for a few remarks. He tweaked the British Lion's tail quite vig-

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orously, much to the satisfaction of Pat Hennessey. Mrs. Bungard recited a "piece" of her own composition into which she poured emotions denied expression in workaday life. Hazel sang three little songs to which George listened, squeezing himself with ecstasy. Her voice was small, of mediocre compass, but nicely trained. While Hazel was singing Samantha closed her eyes, unable to bear the sight of Hazel's pretty face. She felt madly rebellious and wretched, thinking to herself that the city girl's graces and accomplishments had been paid for by the sweat of other folks. Why did parlor tricks impose upon stupid men? Even Uncle Zed had been captured. He was beating time to the lilt of the song, with a silly, senile smile upon his wrinkled countenance. When Samantha opened her eyes, as the last soft note melted away, she saw that Mrs. Spragge had fallen asleep. A tiny ray of sunshine! Auntie was not to be flimflammed. Auntie *knew!*

III

About an hour later they wandered across the dunes on to the clam beach. Mrs. Spragge did not accompany them, but refused peremptorily Samantha's offer to stay with her and clear up.

"You go and hev a good time," she commanded. Then, reading the girl's thoughts, she said kindly: "Never seen you look so purty as you do this afternoon."

George led the way till they came to the rocks. It happened to be high tide. The big combers rolled in, breaking thunderously as they encountered the reefs. High above them hung the eyrie. Further advance

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across the wet, slippery, kelp-covered rocks became dangerous. Mrs. Geldenheimer exclaimed shrilly:

"You never climbed up there?"

"Easy," said George. "Why Samantha got as far as the pinnacle. After that it's resky, because thar ain't good foothold."

Adolf, practical in all things, but no climber, said with emphasis: "What's the matter with a long rope, and descendin' to the nest?"

George shook his head, explaining that such a descent would have been more perilous than the ascent, because the cliff was so high.

"Ever swung at the end of a long rope?" he asked.

"Not yet," said Adolf, thinking of Judge Lynch. "I'm a law-abiding citizen, I am. Beats me how you got there."

"You come up to the pinnacle and see."

"No, you don't, Adolf," said Mrs. Geldenheimer sharply.

Adolf grinned.

"I'm ready," said Hazel.

She had slightly raised her voice. Samantha alone observed this. A derisive smile flickered across her pleasant face.

"Come on!" said George.

The others, with the exception of Samantha, expostulated. George, however, laughed such protest to scorn.

"It's safe enough. Samantha done it."

Hazel divined that he wanted her to do it, that he was quite confident she could do it. This confidence sustained her.

"It's nothing at all," she declared.

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"If she gits scared, she kin grab me. I'll go first, you tread where I tread. Look up, not down."

At this moment Hazel appealed to Samantha.

"It is easy, isn't it?"

"I found it so," replied Samantha. Then, some kindly impulse surged within her. She guessed that Hazel's courage was oozing from every pore; she divined an increasing nervousness. Hastily, speaking in a hard voice, because she was deeply moved, she said to Hazel:

"If I was you, I'd not go. 'Tain't quite so easy coming down. If you ain't certain sure of not gittin' giddy, stay right here."

Hazel hesitated, glancing round. Unhappily, she caught an expression upon Uncle Zed's face. Obviously he was saying to himself: "'Tain't a job fer city madams." George exclaimed impatiently:

"Samanthy's right. If yer scairt, say so."

Hazel compressed her lips. What a stupid injunction! Did he want her to admit fear before all these strangers?

"I'm not scared," she replied firmly.

George faced the cliff. The ascent was ridiculously easy at first. Hazel felt ashamed of her fears and at the same time riotously glad because George alone seemed to have understood her better than she understood herself.

A minute later an awkward corner of jutting rock had to be negotiated. But this, too, was quite easy. George slipped round it, and extended a hand, telling her where to place each foot. She laughed gaily. George laughed too.

The Barbecue

"Silly old hens down there," he whispered. "Cluckin' themselves into fits because a duck takes to water."

"I feel quite safe with you, George."

They climbed higher.

Suddenly the character of the rock changed. A stratum of shale presented itself. George moved horizontally, testing handhold and foothold. There was no danger, because the slope of the cliff was easy, but it became acute lower down. George began to make a path for his companion. Loose rocks tumbled into an unseen void. Hazel could hear them crashing down and down till they reached the water. She could hear also a queer sucking sound, the sob of the tide as it swirled in and out of a small cove.

"Feelin' all right?"

She ought to have answered: "No." Somehow she couldn't admit defeat, even to herself, although her smooth skin had turned to gooseflesh.

"Quite all right," she replied.

"Better rock now," said George.

Hazel followed him in silence, concentrating her attention upon George's feet, looking neither up nor down. Once more her fears vanished, a faint feeling of nausea went with them.

"Almost thar!" exclaimed George cheerily.

Two minutes later the pinnacle was reached. Hazel waved her handkerchief to those below, astonished to find how small they appeared. Between the pinnacle and the face of the cliff was a smooth flat rock. Hazel felt quite able to enjoy herself. The view across the ocean was superb.

Spragge's Canyon

"I'm ever so glad I came," she said, moving nearer to him.

"You darling!" he murmured, seizing her hand.

She didn't repulse him. Unconditional surrender was inscribed upon her flushed face. He might have kissed her *coram publico* had he chosen. She wanted him to kiss her. She wanted to feel his great arms about her body, still panting after the long climb. They stood together poised, so to speak, between earth and sea and sky. And what was elemental in each clamored for expression. Had he said: "I want you madly; and I want Spragge's Canyon, and, by God! I'll have both," she would have whispered back: "Take me, upon your own terms. I am yours. I want you as you want me."

Inexperience kept George tongue-tied. He was terrified of "rushing things," he held her hand, gripping it, but the only words that came from his trembling lips were——

"That's the eyrie."

She looked up, returning the pressure of his hand. It seemed incredible that any creature not possessed of wings could have reached a spot so inaccessible.

"Tell it over again, now. Don't hurry! I want to know exactly how you did it. Oh, I am glad I came."

He obeyed, thrilled by her beguiling tones. This was a big opportunity, so big that an ingenuous youth might be pardoned for seeing, or *sensing*, only part of it.

"Like ter see me do it again?"

She gasped, gripping his hand fiercely.

"No, no. It would kill me. You were mad to run such risks, quite mad, but I'm glad you did it, because nobody else could."

The Barbecue

He told the story, somewhat perfunctorily, as if words bored him. But he grew excited when he described the first step of the return journey, pointing to the crevice in the rock which his foot failed to find.

"I b'lieve," he continued solemnly, "that Samantha saved my life. I was hangin' by my hands, and peterin' slowly out."

"I envy Samantha," said Hazel.

This time he understood. She was his for the asking, but time and place dismayed him. The others were looking on, beginning to wonder why they did not descend. Men who plow the earth, who reclaim the wilderness, find it easy to wait for the harvest. George glanced longingly at Hazel's lips, but he said firmly:

"We must git down."

"I suppose so," she murmured regretfully.

IV

The descent began. Perhaps it was difficult for Hazel not to look down, because George went so slowly. She could see his feet, thrusting themselves into the loose shale, and at the same time the gulf beneath. Once more rocks splashed into the distant pool. Once more deadly nausea overwhelmed her. She stood still, trembling; perspiration broke all over her body, a cold, clammy sweat.

"I can't go on," she faltered.

George turned quickly to behold a white, convulsed face and piteous, despairing eyes.

"Gee! Yer scairt!"

"I can't help it. I—I——"

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She staggered, sky and sea were reeling together.

"Shut yer eyes," commanded George sternly. "I'll carry ye down."

He did so. It was a wonderful feat of strength and endurance. Throughout that fearful descent, Hazel kept her eyes tightly shut, confident that George's foot would not slip. None the less she realized, hearing his breath sob in his throat, what a burden she had become to the man who loved her, and she wondered how that knowledge affected him.

"It's all right," he said hoarsely.

She felt solid rock beneath her feet. The others were cheering. As she opened her eyes George sank in a crumpled heap at her side. Samantha ministered to him, bathing his head with sea water, fanning air into his exhausted lungs. Hazel looked on, repeating miserably:

"I'm so sorry, I—I couldn't help it."

Uncle Zed remarked sarcastically: "Monkeyshines!"

Within five minutes George was laughing gaily. Hazel said to him:

"I wasn't scared while you were carrying me."

"I was," replied George. "Never hev been so scairt in all my life!"

Mr. Bungard delivered himself:

"Not another man in this county could have done it, not one!"

"Pshaw!" said George.

"It's so," said Samantha.

Adolf waxed enthusiastic also.

"Never knew the Fourth o' July pass off without some kind of trouble. There was that runaway buggy year before last."

The Barbecue

"Oh! Quit!" said George, blushing.

Adolf addressed Hazel:

"We'd a picnic on the top of the hill west of Aguila. Someway a team got panicky. Firecrackers, I dare say. They bolted. A woman was in the buggy. She grabbed at the lines, but they went overboard. George was standing near his saddle horse. He was on it and after the buggy before you could wink. Had his riata, too. He lassoed the off horse and stopped the whole caboodle within a few yards of a gulch."

"Any fool could hev done it," said George.

V

The great day ended tamely. Hazel's nausea returned, a mental affliction rather than physical. She had never felt so ashamed, so humiliated. Why had she allowed Samantha to bathe George's head? Why had she not torn off her own hat and fanned air into his lungs?

When the party broke up George set about the chores; Samantha went to the corral. Mrs. Spragge, after listening grimly to the misadventure, returned to the kitchen. Hazel sought her room.

She lay upon the bed thinking hard. Passion had gone out of her small body, leaving it limp and listless. She wondered what George thought of her now. She imagined him saying: "Gee! what a weight that little girl is!" The adoring look had disappeared from his eyes, because she had failed to "make good." At this dreary moment of supreme depression common sense told her that she would go on failing to make good in

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most matters concerning the practical running of the ranch.

But presently her wits began to control her emotions. In crying need—for she was shedding tears—light once again illumined the darkness. By it she glimpsed the weapon which had served her so well when driving back from Aguila—self-depreciation. If she made full confession to George, she would receive plenary absolution. Let weakness appeal to strength, womanhood to manhood. At the same time a conscience, intermittently sensitive, would be salved. She dried her eyes, bathed them in cologne and water, and stared at her face in the mirror. A somewhat piteous image presented itself. Then she went downstairs. Standing upon the front porch she could hear George whistling as he fed his hogs. She rushed up to him excitedly——

“Oh, George?”

“What is it?”

“I must tell you. I shan't sleep good till I do. I was terribly scared to-day, and I was scared when the brake gave, and scared when the squall caught us, and scared worst of all when I got lost. I pretended I wasn't, but I was. There!”

“Why not? Puffec'ly nateral.”

“Please don't tell the others.”

“I'm mighty glad you told me, because,” his eyes twinkled, “I kind o' suspicioned it as I was carryin' you down the cliff. It worried me some that you did pretend with me. I'd as lief cut off my right hand as pretend with you. Tell the others? Never.”

“I'll go back to the house and let you finish your chores.”

The Barbecue

"You hold hard. I've something to say. Let's go into the hay mow. Full of sweet, new cut hay it is. We'll be ever so snug in thar."

Immediately she began to tremble.

"Scared o' me?" he asked in some astonishment.

"George, dear, I'm scared of myself. Perhaps I can guess what you wish to say, but don't say it now."

"Why—you poor little thing!"

"I feel small enough," she retorted. "Have you quite forgiven me?"

"There's nothing to forgive. Now, look ye here, when you're good and ready to listen to me, gimme the nod! See? I'm scared o' myself too, by gum! When we stood on the pinnacle, I—I——"

He paused, choked by emotion. Hazel felt awed, but she held up her hand, enjoining silence. Then she sped back to the house.

CHAPTER XI

WILBUR P. STOCKER COMES TO SPRAGGE'S CANYON

I

THAT night Samantha had a bad time. She found herself unable to sleep and unable to lie still. Love of George consumed her. She had fought against the overmastering passion desperately, but the sight of him collapsed on the rocks had been too much for her. The mere act of ministering to the stricken man re-kindled all those darting flames which she had tried in vain to extinguish with tears and self-abasement. Each night and morning she had prayed:

"O Lord God, Thy will be done, but don't let my George marry this pretty doll!"

She would repeat this a dozen times, like a *dévôte* telling her beads.

Instinct told her that the pretty doll would become a terrible burden to her George. And when she beheld Hazel in his arms, when she saw him staggering down that perilous path where one false step meant instant death, she would have changed places with the doll, even if the death penalty had been exacted. And then, for a few minutes she had been in heaven. Streams of delight flowed through her while she bathed that dear head and fanned air into his lungs. When he opened his eyes, they

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had rested for an instant kindly upon her, when he opened his lips, he had thanked her!

Was she predestined to go down to her grave with this sweet memory and nothing more?

Would life be worth living without George?

Unlike Hazel, who was afraid of her emotions, Samantha was not ashamed of wanting the husband of her choice, but she was ashamed of wanting the property of another woman. It seemed perfectly natural that she should love George, and unnatural that her love should not be returned, because Hazel—so she decided—was unworthy. From the first she had thought: "She don't love him as I do, why should she have him?" The inhumanity of a disastrous marriage made her wild.

She knew, moreover, that other interests engrossed Hazel, ambitions which she, the country girl, could hardly understand. Hazel had prattled to her of society, of triumphs in ballrooms and at receptions, of homage paid by other men, of envy aroused in other women. She had spoken also, quite sincerely, of what could be accomplished by American women, of their duties and responsibilities as citizens of the greatest republic in the world. She had even attempted to explain what "feminism" meant, and the revolt of woman. Samantha had listened politely, impressed by Hazel's cleverness, astonished at her flow of words, but unconvinced by her arguments and utterly unable to perceive her point of view. Dimly, however, she had apprehended that Hazel desired many things, whereas she herself desired only one.

She got out of bed and knelt down.

"O Lord God! Thy will be done! But don't let my

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George marry Hazel Goodrich, if it's all the same to You."

Repeating this again and again she felt easier in mind. Rising from her knees, she sat by the open window, allowing the cool breeze to play upon her feverish body. She noticed that the moon was nearly at the 'full, and she wondered whether George would kill a fat buck. This was the third night in succession that he had waited for hours in the hope of gratifying Hazel's wish to taste venison. George must indeed be passionately in love when he thus sacrificed his sleep.

Samantha muttered to herself:

"He's jest the same dose I hev."

She went back to bed.

In the next room Hazel, also, was lying awake. She had heard George leave the house; she had seen him standing outside in the moonlight with a rifle in his hand; and, so seeing him, the awful suspicion that her lover might be a robber of stagecoaches assailed her with increased virulence. It ought to have occurred to her that the only stage in those parts was driven by Uncle Zed, who carried, as a rule, nothing much more valuable than butter and eggs. A country girl would have guessed at once that George was after deer. Hazel, to do her justice, felt ashamed of her suspicions, but they kept her wide awake none the less, putting a keener edge upon her determination to transplant George. She kept on repeating to herself: "I hate this ranch; I hate those Bungards and Geldenheimers; I could never spend my life here; I am utterly unlike Mrs. Spragge and Samantha."

And yet she wanted George, wanted him more than

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ever. Even if—she hardly dared put her thoughts into words—even if he were engaged in some nefarious traffic, what a joy, what a privilege it would be to touch him to finer issues, to help him grow to his full stature. She had a glorified vision of George playing Darby to her Joan, thanking her with tears in his eyes because she had raised him to her heights. Every fiber thrilled at the thought. And the world of Oakland, aye, the larger world across the bay, perhaps the whole continent, would know that this had been her life's work; that a Daughter of the Golden West had justified her existence consummately.

She remained awake for some hours, because she was intensely excited. Life seemed the better worth living because she had glimpsed death.

Before she went to sleep she passed in blissful review those minutes upon the pinnacle. If George had kissed her——! As she fell asleep she murmured to herself:

"I do love him."

II

Two days later Hazel was helping George in the berry patch. Small sections of this were irrigated twice a week, because the water available for such a purpose had to be taken from the creek much higher up the Canyon, where the stream during the dry season became a tiny rivulet. Twice a week in July it was just possible to collect enough water to irrigate a quarter of an acre of berries.

It was easy and pleasant work.

George vigorously wielded a spade, rapidly making miniature banks of earth. Hazel, hoe in hand, diverted

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the water from one banked-up square to another, knocking down a tiny wall and so forming a channel for the precious, percolating fluid which the warm, dry soil absorbed greedily. The morning was very hot, but Hazel could slake her thirst with ripe berries and dip burning hands into the cool water.

"Father made one mistake," said George.

"Only one?"

"He'd oughter hev built the house lower down the Canyon. Then we'd hev had a plenty o' water, because the creek flows good an' strong past the house."

"That's where you want it, isn't it?"

George laughed. Hazel's remarks concerning all matters connected with the practical running of the ranch betrayed an astonishing ignorance and inexperience. For example, she had asked Samantha why the two cows were milked at regular hours. Why not slip out with a pail and get what milk you needed at any old hour?

George explained.

"The creek here is five feet below the level of the ground we hev ter irrigate. See? The water could be taken out with a motor engine—there's not enough force or fall fer a ram—an' mebbe some day I'll buy me one, but, as things air, we hev to depend on our dam, two hundred yards up the Canyon."

"I understand perfectly."

"By gum!" exclaimed George. "It's fun workin' with you, because you do catch on mighty quick."

"Tell me some more about berry-raising."

"It's easy to raise 'em. Pickin' and marketin' ain't so easy."

He continued leisurely, talking as he worked, never

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wasting a minute nor one drop of water. Twice a week during the early spring and once a fortnight during the summer he took a light load of berries to Aguila, which he sold to Adolf Geldenheimer. Adolf bought honey and butter, also, eggs, apples, and poultry, crediting George's account with divers small sums. In his turn, Adolf sold to George seed-barley, groceries and dry-goods. At the end of the year the accounts generally balanced each other. Hazel remarked shrewdly:

"Mr. Geldenheimer makes a double profit."

George had to admit this.

"Saves us a heap of trouble," he remarked. "And everything else is clear gain, dollars to be invested."

"Everything else includes cattle and horses and hogs?"

"Yes—everything lawful and unlawful."

"Unlawful?"

"I sell venison as mutton, or goat. I'm well fixed, money to burn, but I don't burn it."

"What do you do with it?"

"Buy business property in San Lorenzy; I've a good few dollars on loan, secured by mortgage. Say, I'm tellin' you all my secrets."

"Not all, George."

"Yer right. I'd fergot."

She thought that he looked very sly.

"Why do you sell venison, if it's illegal to do so?"

George roared with laughter.

"We air particular."

Hazel was slightly ruffled.

"Evidently you aren't."

"I'm as honest as my neighbors, more so, I reckon, than some of 'em."

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"Oh!"

He continued cheerfully:

"Poor folks ain't overly honest. In early days, squatters around Aguila clapped their brand on to many a calf an' colt belongin' to old Don Juan. Father wasn't too extry particular. Everybody done it."

"Do you do it still?"

"Why no. Thar ain't the same chances. Barb-wire put an end to 'em. Say, you do look sweet in that outfit."

The "outfit" had been specially designed by Hazel, the right equipment for such work as she could do, a canvas skirt, rather short, displaying to advantage her small feet and trim ankles, a thin flannel shirt with a sailor's collar embellished by a bandana handkerchief, and a sombrero bought at the Aguila store. Hazel had rolled up her sleeves, discarding gloves. Face, arms, and hands were already a clear brown. She smiled reflectively, for she was expecting this particular remark, and prepared to enlarge upon it.

"It's a nice compliment to you, George."

"How's that?"

"I wanted to—to try to identify myself with you and your work. I feel quite at home in them."

"And you look fine. Some way, you seem nearer to me, more of a flesh an' blood woman, less of a city-raised angel."

She laughed, although her tone was grave, as she said, hesitatingly:

"Would you like me to feel that you were coming nearer to me?"

"You bet I would."

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"Suppose I asked you, just as much for your own sake as mine, to alter a little your mode of speech."

"Quit swearin'?"

"I mean your grammar and pronunciation. You say 'ter' instead of 'to,' and, really, you treat the letter 'g' with quite shameless indifference. Apparently, it has offended you."

"Do I say 'ter' instead of 'to'?"

"Don't you know that you do?"

"Mis' Bungard used ter, used *to* be at me everlastingly——"

"Ever—last—*ing*—ly."

"Everlastingly, then, to talk as she done."

"As she did."

"That's right. As she *did*. Does it matter—much?"

"It matters a lot to me, dear. It would matter still more, if, if we were married, and if we were meeting people who might underrate you, because you spoke differently from them. That would hurt me."

George considered this. Then his face brightened.

"If you marry me," he said slowly, "I'll go to school again with you."

"Won't you do what I ask for your own sake?"

"Not if you can't marry me."

"Then you have no real wish—apart from pleasing me—to develop yourself, to improve all along the line, to go on rising, instead of standing still, or going back?"

To her dismay he refused to take her seriously.

"I'm jest about right fer Spragge's Canyon. It would hit mother and Samantha bang in the eye if I began to put on frills when I was talkin'."

"My father didn't think I was putting on frills when

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I talked more grammatically than he did. He was proud of me."

"You was a girl. I reckon your father paid considerable fer yer schoolin'. He wanted ter see the value of his good dollars. Must hev warmed him up good when he seen they wan't wasted."

Hazel felt slightly impatient. George's shrewdness at once dismayed and delighted her. She realized her impotence to get "at" him in her own personal way, but she realized also, with increasing conviction, that he was worth "getting at."

"Who's this?" exclaimed George.

A buggy was approaching.

"Must be some damn book agent," continued George. "I'll fix him in two ticks. The gall o' them fellers! Regler leeches. Now, you watch me handle him. We'll hev some fun."

The buggy came to a standstill at the hitching post opposite the front porch. A man descended and hitched his horse. He was wearing a white linen dust-coat and a soft felt hat pulled over his eyes. Seeing two persons in the berry patch he walked toward them. Hazel uttered a sharp exclamation.

"What is it?"

"It's—it's a friend of mine. You've heard me mention him. It's Mr. Wilbur Stocker."

"Gee!"

III

Wilbur greeted Hazel with impressive politeness, explaining fluently his appearance in Spragge's Canyon.

"You put the notion of coming into my head. Can-

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didly, I had forgotten that there was such a county as San Lorenzo. I have never been here. I made a few inquiries and discovered that nobody else had been here. It appeared to be quite virgin territory. I took the cars within a few hours of reading your letter. Put in the Fourth traveling down, put in two good days in San Lorenzo, and about the old landing. Conditions are resurrecting themselves. The landing used to do good business in early days. And it will do good business again, if I can read the times. All ways of transportation—roads, rail, rivers, and sea—will receive due attention."

"That's so," assented George.

Dismayed by Mr. Stocker's unexpected appearance, George had supposed that the stranger had traveled a long distance to see Hazel. Obviously he had come on business. Otherwise he would not have waited two days.

"Couldn't return home without calling on you," continued Wilbur. "Perhaps you're ready to go back to Oakland. If so," he made a formal bow, "I'm at your service as an escort."

"You'll stop and eat dinner?" asked George.

"I shall be delighted."

"That's good. I'll go tell Mother."

"I'll attend to the water," said Hazel.

George nodded pleasantly to Wilbur and walked away, turning, after a few steps:

"Shall I put yer plug into the barn and give him a feed?"

"Thank you," said Wilbur. "I'm stopping at Aguila."

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Then he stared interrogatively at Hazel, taking careful note of the "outfit."

"What are you doing here?" he asked curtly.

"Can't you see? Irrigating berries."

He perceived that she resented this surprise visit. But he was too self-satisfied, too sure of his own claims upon her, to grasp the real situation.

"Comic opera?"

"Not at all."

"Shall we sit under that tree? You look rather warm, Hazel."

She followed him to a rude seat under a cottonwood, biting her lips with vexation. In two words he had transported her and himself to Oakland. She was quick enough to appreciate these two words.

Comic opera!

Oakland, indeed, had spoken, delivered its verdict, smilingly amused, smilingly cynical. Wilbur changed his tone.

"You look perfectly charming. What a handsome fellow Corydon is! And this place—idyllic!"

"Are you sneering?"

"Heaven forbid! I am—I admit it—in the dark. Your aunt either would not or could not enlighten me. I inferred a whim, a maiden's declaration of independence."

"I congratulate you, Wilbur, upon your inferences."

"Thanks!" He lighted a cigarette, adjusted his pince-nez, and removed his dust-coat, appearing spick and span in a cool gray flannel suit. He crossed his legs, lay back, lazily regarding her, and exhaled a neat ring of

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smoke. Then he continued in the same slightly derisive tone:

"Mr. Patrick Hennessey spoke of you with Celtic enthusiasm. It seems you have had adventures."

"I wrote—misadventures."

"Have they amused you as much as you expected?"

"More, much more. I was getting bored to tears in Oakland."

"There was, there is, Stocker's Landing."

She frowned. How stupid clever men could be! How exasperatingly incapable of understanding women! How dared he mention Stocker's Landing at such a moment! George might be excused for "rushing things," not this sophisticated, complacent man of business. She decided that he must be punished, but her quick wits failed to conceive what might be adequate punishment. He was in the mood to twist any words of hers into ridicule. Nevertheless she said tartly:

"You see I wanted a change for the better."

Ah! That stung. Wilbur lifted his too thin eyebrows, displaying his teeth in a forced smile. Gold sparkled in those teeth. Some of them would never ache again. A tell-tale fastening betrayed a "plate." She decided that his sharp eyes were set too close together. His complexion lacked color and texture. And yet, noting these disabilities, she felt sorry that she had hurt him.

"I meant," she explained hastily, "that Stocker's Landing is too like Oakland. I wanted an immense change. I wanted to see myself with detachment."

"But why?"

She remained silent.

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He pressed the point, quite pleasantly, speaking without any irritating derision.

"Why do you seek detachment, Hazel? And why do you hunt for it in such a place as this? How did you come to know these good people? Are they old friends? Why is there an air of mystery about this visit?"

She answered him with courage.

"I'll try to tell you, even if it hurts both of us. I want to be honest with you, and honest with myself, but it's not easy. I hate to admit that I don't quite know what I do want. Education ought to teach one that at least, but it seems to work the other way—with us American women. The Spragges—who are not educated, as we understand the word—do know what they want; and I envy them. You know what you want. And that makes it so difficult for you to sympathize with me, and the odd unrest I suffer from. You will get what you want——"

"I wish that I was sure of that, dear."

He spoke kindly and temperately, touching her hand lightly.

Hazel amended her last sentence.

"At any rate, you will get part of what you want, the business end. That counts, doesn't it?"

"Of course it counts."

"Tremendously?"

"Well, yes—tremendously. But why do you lay such emphasis on that, Hazel? And you look at me so oddly. I've always understood that you liked my being keen about business, and nobody knows better than you what success in business exacts, the concentration, and so forth."

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"Yes, yes. I'm glad you're keen, Wilbur. It makes it easier for me, if——"

"If?"

"If I don't marry you. You see, it's like this. I hate to say it, but you've forced my hand. And, perhaps, between us two, plain speaking is best."

"I'm quite sure it is."

"If I don't marry you it won't knock you out, will it?"

Wilbur threw away his cigarette, moving restlessly, frowning as he tried to peer deep into the hazel eyes which confronted him steadily. There was a long pause.

IV

Finally he answered the question honestly. It may not be quite fair to add that early in life Wilbur had grasped a cardinal principle, inherited from his father. He knew that it paid a man to be honest and truthful. Fools and knaves told lies and attempted to evade their obligations. He prided himself justly upon being "straight."

"It would not *kill* me," he said coldly. Never had he felt less like a lover as he made this damaging admission. It annoyed him intensely that Hazel should have turned the tables on him, forcing his hand, at the very moment, too, when he wished to keep his trumps back for a carefully meditated *coup*!

Hazel murmured:

"I almost married Clinton Tarrant."

"Really?"

"But I wanted more than a one-third interest in my future husband. Poor Clinton has to devote one-third

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of his attention to that invalid mother and sister; the other one-third is given to science. What was left did not quite allure me."

She said this pleasantly, but in a voice as cold as his. She saw that he winced as he retorted with some vehemence:

"Quite obviously you were not madly in love with Tarrant."

"Exactly. And, as obviously, I am not madly in love with you. Nor are you madly in love with me."

"Yes, I am. It's no passing fancy with me. I've wanted to marry you for three solid years. I've never paid attention to another girl. I swear that I can make you happy."

"How?" she asked softly.

He perceived that he must play his trumps now, if he wished to score.

"You and I," he said slowly, "are not sentimentalists. You're twenty-two and I'm ten years older. Each of us wants a partner. Together we ought to achieve our ambitions. While I was in Tacoma and Seattle I did business with some big men. And where do you think the business was done? In their offices? Not much. At their homes, after dinner. Each man had the right sort of wife. I was never better entertained. I felt in my bones that I'd struck the right crowd, and that they wanted me. They'd want me just twice as much if you were my wife. I repeat, together we can make things hum. You won't be bored to tears if you marry me. And, as for Oakland, well, I've about made up my mind to tackle San Francisco, if you'll tackle it with me."

He tried to take her hand, perceiving that he had

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made an impression, but at this moment Mrs. Spragge, followed by George, appeared on the front porch. Hazel said hurriedly:

"I can't answer you now."

They rose from the bench as Mrs. Spragge approached. Introductions followed and a stifled ejaculation from George.

"What is it?" asked Hazel.

"Nothing," replied George.

He was staring at the precious water, liquid gold at that season of the year. Thousands of gallons had been wasted.

"Gracious," murmured Hazel. "I forgot."

Mrs. Spragge smiled grimly.

CHAPTER XII

RUCTIONS

I

WILBUR wisely decided not to press Hazel for a decision, nor, indeed, did he find an opportunity of speaking to her alone after the midday meal, during which he made himself vastly agreeable to the Spragges, recognizing in Mrs. Spragge those great qualities which distinguish the woman *of* the West from the woman *in* the West. Mrs. Spragge was of California, a part of the state, racy of the soil and sunshine, a square peg firmly driven into a square hole. George, too, attracted him, because his head appeared to be as level as his mother's. He supposed that Hazel had known these good, worthy people for years; they might be remotely connected with her. He himself was proud of relations of the same sturdy type who lived in the Mendocino back woods. He felt sincerely grateful to the Spragges and their Canyon because Hazel looked so enchantingly alive and vigorous. High health, he reflected, ought to be as contagious as disease.

Hazel, on her part, appreciated Wilbur's delicacy and tact, although she was uncomfortably aware that he would not leave Aguila until he had imposed something in the nature of an ultimatum. He promised to return to the ranch on the morrow. Meanwhile he was anti-

Ruitions

pating a business talk with Adolf Geldenheimer. Twenty years before there had been a landing just below George's clam beach. Wheat from the plains behind the Coast Range had been shipped at a small wharf, which was "frozen out" by the railroad, that mighty octopus. To-day the dairymen, the squatters who raised early potatoes and vegetables, the fruit men, and, in fine, everybody who had anything to sell in distant markets, were in the tentacles of the monster, who pinched them mercilessly. According to Wilbur, the old landings along the coast might be raised from the dead, if a new generation could be made to see how vital such a resurrection was to their interests.

George, however, divined the truth. In his slow-working, shrewd mind he dismissed all Wilbur's talk of landings as "poppycock." A slick talker from Oakland was after Hazel.

This fact gnawed at his heart, making him abjectly miserable. Of course he leapt to the conclusion that Hazel liked Wilbur, because she had forgotten to shut off the water. He had impressed upon her the value of water when the creek was running dry. Wilbur had swept all thought of George and his interests clean out of her mind.

It racked him to think of his foolish promise not to rush things, to wait for a nod from her pretty head. It racked him to more poignant pangs when he realized that Wilbur was a talker, able to talk the heart out of a girl, or the tail off a dog! He told himself wretchedly that Hazel was not satisfied with him as he was. She disliked his rough speech. She wanted to "make him over."

Even in small things he was out of luck. Three nights

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in succession he had "sat up" for a buck which slaked its thirst elsewhere. To-night he meant to try again. The odd conviction came to him that if he got the buck he would get Hazel also. The rattlesnakes, too, were harder to capture. He had secured seven beauties, big fellows with many rattles, but he wanted another half dozen to make the promised tale complete.

When Wilbur drove away George took his sack and forked stick into the hills, leaving Hazel with the women-folk. To avoid awkward questions, he sneaked from the house by the back way, but, unfortunately, Hazel caught a glimpse of him, and once more curiosity consumed her.

There must be something secret connected with George. She tried to pump Samantha, a process quite as futile as trying to coax water out of the Arizona desert! Samantha's curt: "Search me!" aggravated her beyond endurance.

Mrs. Spragge happened to be busy in the kitchen, making strawberry jam. Samantha sat sewing with Hazel. Rivalry indicated itself in the work undertaken by each girl. Samantha stitched away at a stout flannel petticoat. The mere sight of it in July provoked perspiration. Hazel, somewhat ostentatiously, was threading baby-riband into her filmiest and prettiest underclothing. More, the very nature of Samantha's task, not to mention Mrs. Spragge's, adumbrated careful provision for the future rather than the present. Hazel became irritably sensible that work on a ranch was concerned with the future rather than the present. It was difficult to enjoy that present, because the future exacted such never-ending consideration. Mrs. Spragge was sweltering in

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the kitchen, because jam came in handy when ripe fruit was out of season. In the dog days, thick flannel petticoats had to be fashioned because it might be bitterly cold in January!

Samantha eyed the pale blue baby ribbon with smouldering contempt. Was Hazel "fixing up" for George or Mr. Stocker? Like George, she never doubted the true reason of Mr. Stocker's advent, but, unlike George, she dismissed as grossly improbable the chance of Mr. Stocker being preferred to George. The city dude had come to the ranch on a damn fool errand. That was her summing up.

Each girl was aware of the other's suppressed hostility. Hazel had guessed long ago that Samantha wanted George, and at first this sad fact had provoked pity and sympathy. But since the fiasco of the Fourth these sweet feelings had turned sour, because Hazel had read derision and contempt in Samantha's eyes. Samantha deemed her unfit to become George's wife! What impudence! What ignorance! She pictured George married to Samantha, each degenerating, each going to seed. Samantha would ruin George, kowtow to him, deny herself everything for him, work her fingers to the bone for him, and keep him at her level for ever and ever. What could such a girl know of the higher ideals? Nothing!

Certainly life was horribly muddled.

It occurred to her that the real right thing in the interests of the race—she had "taken" half a dozen invaluable lessons in eugenics—would be for Samantha to marry Wilbur Stocker. She was a first-class housekeeper, and would bear him strong children; she would never dream of interfering with his business.

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Presently they fell into desultory talk. Hazel could not resist the temptation to "stir up" Samantha; she wanted to try on, so to speak, certain ideas loosely basted together. Such talk was excellent practice, and much encouraged in social circles in Oakland.

"What do you think of Mr. Stocker?" she asked brightly.

"Ain't he your friend?" murmured Samantha.

"Certainly; but that needn't prevent our talking about him with entire frankness. I enjoy a good gossip about my friends. Gossip is a sign of an intelligent interest in one's fellow creatures. Don't you think so?"

"Mebbe."

"I am quite sure it is. Now, how did Mr. Stocker impress you?"

"Kind o' thin."

Hazel laughed. Poor Wilbur was thin compared with the stalwart George.

"Works his tongue overly much," suggested Samantha. "Terrible talker! I mind me of a shote we had year before last. It useter run about squeakin' an' squealin' all the time, even when th' others was at the trough. It never fattened any. It jest up an' died."

Hazel laughed again. Samantha always amused her. But the laughter failed to ring quite true. It occurred to Hazel for the first time that poor Wilbur was significantly thin. If she married him and if he "up and died," what then?

"His talk is not thin, Samantha."

"Ain't it? I couldn't foller all of it. Seems to hev good business sense. Adolf Geldenheimer'll meet his match this afternoon."

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"Did you listen to what Mr. Stocker said about Spragge's Canyon?"

Samantha hesitated.

"I dunno as I did, Hazel. What kin he know of our ranch, anyways?"

"You are so literal. Of course he knows nothing of your ranch in the sense you mean. But he knows everything in another sense."

"As how?"

"He meets you for the first time, and, believe me, first impressions are immensely valuable, particularly to a woman."

"But Mr. Stocker ain't a woman."

"There's something of the woman in him, as there ought to be—a quickness of perception, an intuition essentially feminine. Well, he meets you all, and he sees that you are astonishingly healthy and happy."

"Sees all that at onct, does he?"

"Of course he does. Then he sees a well-ordered little house, good plain food on the table—a ranch run properly."

"He saw a lot o' water runnin' to waste."

"That was entirely my fault. What was I going to say?"

"Search me," said Samantha stolidly.

Hazel grew nettled. The repetition of this stupid bit of slang put her ideas to flight. With some difficulty she recaptured them.

"Oh, yes. Mr. Stocker grasped the lesson that Spragge's Canyon teaches."

"I want to know!"

"It's a small world in itself, almost self-supporting."

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"Almost?"

"It is self-supporting."

"More 'n that."

'You're missing my point, Samantha. In its tiny way this ranch is complete."

"No, it ain't. You ask Auntie 'bout that."

Hazel skated swiftly across this thin ice. She knew what Mrs. Spragge wanted to make her home complete.

"I mean, speaking generally, that there's not much more to be done here."

"Does Mr. Stocker say that?"

Samantha's tone was sharp; her placidity vanished.

"You heard what he said when he congratulated Mrs. Spragge and George upon having made the most, the *most*, mind you, of their opportunities. What did you infer from that?"

"I thought he was layin' it on a bit thick."

"Mr. Stocker is sincerity itself. He meant exactly what he said, and he's right. With his business snap and experience he saw that the creative work to be done here has been done, and well done. A really active, enterprising man could not find in your canyon sufficient scope for his energies."

Hazel paused. She felt pleased with herself. The right words had flowed freely. She regretted that Wilbur was absent, because he shared with her a nice enthusiasm in pursuit of the elusive phrase. They had belonged to the same Browning society. Together they had wrestled with the poet's obscurities; together they had gloried in an enlarged vocabulary.

To her utter amazement Samantha said fiercely:

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"You want to snake George outter Spragge's Canyon?"

This was positively archaic, of the primal clay, but Hazel was too proud, and too assured of her own cleverness, not to reply quietly, with dignity:

"As George's true friend, I want to see him grow to his full stature."

"I call it—wicked, sinfully wicked."

"Let us discuss it temperately."

"I can't. I can't discuss it at all with you. I ain't got no words, only feelings. If you tempt George from Spragge's Canyon, yer a wicked girl, an' a fullish one, too. There!"

II

As she spoke she jumped up, letting the flannel petticoat fall to the floor. Hazel rose, also, very pale and trembling. Samantha reminded her of a heifer who, some days previously, without any provocation had tried to hook George in the cow corral. Samantha was tossing her head, like the heifer, and stamping with rage. For an instant Hazel thought that she was about to be assaulted.

Hazel recovered self-possession. With a faint smile and a hardly perceptible shrug of her shoulders, she moved toward the front door, intending to retire discreetly. Samantha said shortly:

"No, ye don't."

"Please let me pass. I think you have been very rude, but I make allowances."

"I'm not through yet," said Samantha. "I'm goin' ter call Aunt Almiry."

Before Hazel could protest Samantha had done so in

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a loud clear voice. Mrs. Spragge's heavy step was heard in the hallway; the door opened and she appeared. For an instant she looked steadily at each girl; then Samantha spoke:

"Hazel Goodrich means to snake George outter this. I taxed her with it, and she owned up. I allowed you ought ter know. I've jest told Hazel that she's wicked an' fullish."

"Hev you?" said Mrs. Spragge. "I reckon you forgot 'bout Hazel bein' our guest."

"It's all right, Mrs. Spragge," murmured Hazel.

"No, it ain't, not if you meant it. Did you?"

"This ranch is too small for George."

"If you could snake him out, you'd do it?"

"Yes."

"You think ye know my son better 'n I do?"

Hazel made no reply. Mrs. Spragge continued deliberately:

"I suspicioned this some days ago. I surmised you was layin' back fer a brush with George, but I did not think you'd take us on first."

Hazel said politely:

"I'd rather not discuss the matter with Samantha and you."

"But you must. We'll hev it out now."

"Two to one!"

"Samanthy, you go into the kitchen. When I heard you callin', I took the preservin' pan off the stove. Go put it on agen."

Samantha hesitated but obeyed. As she was crossing the threshold, she turned to fire a Parthian shot.

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"Guest or no guest, Hazel Goodrich, yer a-doin' Satan's work!"

Samantha vanished, slamming the door.

III

"Sit ye down," said Mrs. Spragge. She picked up the flannel petticoat and brushed some dust from it. When Hazel sank rather limply into a chair Mrs. Spragge seated herself and began work on the petticoat, as if nothing had happened. Hazel said desperately:

"Isn't the thing too personal to be discussed?"

"What ain't personal to me, ain't worth discussin'!"

Mrs. Spragge went on sewing. Hazel sat with her small hands folded on her lap, waiting for her hostess to begin. The whole affair had suddenly become intolerably distasteful and stupid. She blamed herself because she ought not to have invited an expression of opinion from Samantha. As Mrs. Spragge seemed to be absorbed in the flannel petticoat Hazel murmured gently:

"I'm sorry, very sorry that I provoked this outburst."

"But—you—done—it."

"Yes, I know. Samantha is right; I am foolish, but not wicked."

"Fullish people air often wicked without knowin' it."

By this time Hazel wanted peace at any price, but she was not to have it. Lightly had she embarked upon this discussion, heavily indeed was it fated to end. Mrs. Spragge had assumed a judicial air which at another time might have amused Hazel. In a moment wisdom, like Minerva, would burst from her Olympian head.

"I warned you," said Mrs. Spragge solemnly, "that you'd never make my George over to suit your ideas,

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unless they happened to be his. An'," she paused dramatically, "yer idees, Hazel, ain't his, an' never will be."

Much nettled, Hazel replied:

"Time will determine that."

Mrs. Spragge's face remained singularly placid.

"I know what yer idees air, and I'm goin' to give ye mine."

"Please!"

"I've come by 'em, sech 'as they air, honestly."

"Do you mean that——"

"Tch! Tch! I mean, child, that I've paid for 'em, that my idees ain't taken from other people, nor from books. I'm fifty-five, more 'n double yer age, an' with fifty times yer experience."

"Surely experience can be borrowed?"

"Mighty seldom; never by young girls! Now, look ye here! You believe in the 'git up and git thar' gospel, don't ye?"

"I do."

"Wal, it works out fine if ye do git thar. S'pose ye don't?"

"There must be failures, of course."

"Too many. This country's full of 'em. Yer friend Mr. Stocker was talkin' at noon to-day about processions. He aims ter lead processions, don't he?"

"He's managin' director of a fine business."

"Is that so? I suspicioned that something ailed him. He looks, pore feller! mighty near foundered. He may be leadin' processions, but he won't process long, because he ain't built fer a stayer."

This was very unpleasant. Once before Hazel had been vouchsafed a vision of herself at rest in a casket

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lined with white satin. As Mrs. Spragge spoke she beheld poor Wilbur as the principal but not the most attractive figure in *his* last procession. Little did Mrs. Spragge guess that her argument against the "git up an' git thar" gospel would be personally applied by Hazel, weaning her reason from the advantages of a marriage with the manager of a big business, and inflaming her instinct to link herself with one who might possibly founder in Mammon's quicksands, but never in health and vitality.

She said patiently:

"Shall we leave Mr. Stocker out of this?"

"Cert'ny. But he pints a moral. Our cities is full of jest sech men, sorter nickel-in-the-slot machines. They hev ther uses. I'd be the last ter deny it. But the most of 'em end on the dumpheap. Nature scraps 'em!"

Hazel was much impressed, and well she might be, for this strong, massive woman spoke out of the fullness of a great heart, with a force of feeling which the girl could neither measure nor resist.

"Now, my George——"

Mrs. Spragge paused. Her voice grew tender and persuasive. Hazel acknowledged instantly its quality. She knew that the mother was thinking of the baby who had clung to her breasts, of the child she had taught to toddle, of the boy in whose strength she had exulted, of the young man who had filled her widowed heart with gratitude and happiness. Was this George drifting out of her life, beyond her ken, never to return to her?

Mrs. Spragge continued:

"My George ain't ambitious, as you be. That's jest whar I come in. I've learned him, ever sence he was

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in short pants, to look fer happiness to home. He found it, till you come, right here in this Canyon. I've learned him not to borrrer money, nor trouble. One generally means t'other. I've learned him ter save his dollars agen the hard times which never pass any man by. I've learned him ter take his pleasures in the hills, huntin' deer an' quail, studyin' wild things, instead of in the saloons an' back o' stores. I've learned him, Hazel, that it's a bigger thing ter do a small job right than a big job wrong. Air you goin' ter unpick my stitches?" She paused again with dramatic intensity, adding fiercely: "*Air ye?*"

IV

Hazel began to cry, a form of self-indulgence which—as she was well aware—did not disfigure her. Samantha, after much weeping, displayed red, swollen lids, pale, puffy cheeks, and a general air of disintegration. Hazel's tears trickled slowly down her pink cheeks to be collected by a dainty handkerchief. She looked pit-eous and pensive; her maiden's bosom rose and fell; her red lips pouted seductively. At school and high school Hazel's tears had dissolved many difficulties, especially when they arose between her and the teachers of the miscalled sterner sex.

She may have hoped that tears would float her gently out of this very tight place into which she had wandered. To her dismay Mrs. Spragge took no notice of them. Her eyes appeared to be fixed upon that hateful flannel petticoat; her fingers stitched diligently, not so swiftly as Samantha's, but even more steadily. Hazel dabbed at her cheeks with an eight-inch square of cambric. Tears

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no longer welled into her eyes; an angry flame dried the few that sparkled upon her thick lashes.

"I want to do what is right," she affirmed with vehemence. "I am not thinking of myself at all."

"That's fine," said Mrs. Spragge dryly.

"I cannot help my ideas being different from yours and Samantha's. I respect your ideas and I thought you would respect mine. I've been taught to respect other people's ideas. I belong to a society that meets once a month on Sunday evenings. We select some topic of general interest; and we invite two persons to approach it from opposite viewpoints. We listen to both sides. I always take in the *Chronicle* and the *Examiner*. I've tried to keep my mind open."

"To—what?"

"To—to a right conviction, of course."

"That's good. How do you know that it is—right?"

Hazel found herself wriggling, an indication of weakness which she despised. This cross-examination began to distress her. She remembered that Clinton Tarrant had just such a knack of posing exasperating questions. On that account she disliked the Berkeley crowd and kept aloof from them. Men and women of the world did not ask such questions.

She replied feebly: "One feels that it is right."

"You *feel*, then, that it's right fer George ter quit his home, because you *feel* that it's too small fer him?"

"Well, yes. A man like George might become Governor of the State."

"Sakes alive! Politics?"

Her mere pronunciation of the word was eloquent of what Mrs. Spragge thought of politics.

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"Why not? A business man can't ignore politics."

"George hates 'em like pizon."

Hazel retorted irritably:

"It's like this, Mrs. Spragge. I believe sincerely that George is living in a small circle which will grow smaller. You think otherwise. And there it is. We must agree to disagree."

"Yer only thinking of George?"

"I am."

"Then you love him?"

Hazel grew scarlet. She told herself that this was outrageous. How dared this woman ask such a leading question?

"You have no right to ask that."

"Yes, I hev, too. I'm his mother. If you do love George, if my boy is the dearest thing on this earth to you, dearer than yerself, Hazel, why then I'll admit yer right to interfere with his life. If you don't love him, quit foolin' with what isn't yours."

Hazel drew in her breath sharply. In the expressive language of the West, she was "up against it." A retreat seemed ignominious. Cornered at last, stung to desperation, she exclaimed defiantly:

"I do love him!"

"Does he know it?"

"No, that's why I resent your asking such a question."

"Well, he shan't know it from me, dear. You can take yer own time to tell him." She sighed heavily and her voice lost something of its dominating power. "It ain't certain that you kin persuade him to leave Spragge's Canyon, but if you love him true, and if you feel that

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'twill be fer his happiness ter leave his old home, you must act accordin'. It's plain to me that George loves you, an' wants you more 'n he's wanted anything else. Because of that I say to you—take keer!"

Her voice was profoundly sad as she ended. Hazel remained silent, not unmoved herself. Mrs. Spragge carried the flannel petticoat into the kitchen.

Hazel went to her room.

V

She was angry with all the world, angry with Wilbur, because he had been the innocent cause of these ructions, angry with Samantha and Mrs. Spragge because she accused them of violating the sacred rites of hospitality, angry with George because he was wandering about the brush hills instead of entertaining his guest, and, finally, angry with herself because a shrewd but illiterate old woman had worsted her in open argument, and extorted from her a premature avowal of love. Presently she heard Samantha's step upon the wooden stairs, and then a knock at the door.

"Come in."

Samantha entered. Her comely face was ravaged by tempestuous weeping. She stood in the doorway, saying meekly:

"I beg pardon."

"I understand. Not another word—please!"

Samantha continued, in the same crushed voice:

"Aunt Almiry made me come up before I went to my cows. I was hatefully rude. I know it. I'm sorry."

Hazel advanced to kiss her.

"No," said Samantha miserably. "I can't kiss an' be

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friends—yet. I'm a silly fool, and a nice sight I've made o' myself; but howlin' allers did make me look ugly an' feel ugly. I feel worse 'n I look."

She disappeared, going down stairs, back to her cows. Hazel felt unaffectedly sorry for her, a sorrow deepened by the reflection that poor Samantha couldn't feel worse than she looked. She examined her own face exhaustively, trying to discover what effect the emotions of the afternoon had had upon her. After five not unpleasant minutes she decided that violent emotion affected her inwardly.

She wrote a long letter to the good aunt, telling her to expect an affectionate niece at any moment. After describing the barbecue in her lightest vein, she devoted a few lines to Wilbur.

"Wilbur" (she wrote) "appeared unexpectedly this morning. Pray don't jump to the conclusion that he came to see me. He is, as usual, engrossed by business, and talks of landings with anybody who is kind enough to listen to him. I am rather anxious about him. He is painfully thin. It struck me to-day, quite shockingly, that his is *not* a good life. Isn't that how the insurance agents put it?

"Auntie mine, I am getting a wee bit homesick . . ."

Having finished her letter Hazel selected a book, "Poems of Passion," by Mrs. Ella Wheeler Wilcox. This daintily bound volume had been bought after meeting George. Hazel carried it to the open window and sat down. She glanced at the watch she wore upon her wrist. It was chore-time. George was overdue at the

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barn. Her mind dwelt lingeringly upon chores which had to be done, even if the heart were breaking. It occurred to her that this might be a theme worthy of Mrs. Wilcox. Had poets ever done chores? Would not the doing of chores kill the poetic gift? Joaquin Miller, for example, living a hermit's life, had shown kindred souls how the doing of chores might be brought to the irreducible minimum. Thus musing she reflected that George would never expect her to feed hogs or milk cows.

George appeared.

He was lost to sight as he crossed the creek. When he appeared again he paused for an instant, glancing about him, so Hazel thought, stealthily. Then he advanced swiftly toward the house. He could not see Hazel, although he had glanced up at her window, because she was sitting behind a thick muslin curtain. He reached the porch when she called to him.

"Oh, George!"

Yes, at sound of her voice he started, pausing irresolutely.

"That you, Hazel?"

"Any luck?"

He answered cheerily:

"Might be worse. Come acrost the fresh track of a big buck."

Obviously he was trying to lure her attention from the sack, which was not empty. He nodded carelessly, tramped up the steps, and entered his "den." Hazel distinctly heard the click of a key turning raspingly in a lock.

Now, why, in the name of the Sphinx, should George lock himself into his evil-smelling room?

CHAPTER XIII

THE WAY OF A MAID WITH A MAN

I

SAMANTHA did not appear at the supper table. When George, with a man's indiscreet curiosity, asked his mother what ailed her, Mrs. Spragge replied shortly:

"Samanthy's gone to bed with the awfulest headache."

"Gone to bed with a headache," repeated George.

"Yas."

"Guess she got overhet. Hot spell we've bin hevin', an' no fogs. Moon 'll rise late ter-night." He looked at Hazel. "It'll be nice an' cool by the creek after supper."

Hazel's eyes remained demurely fixed upon her plate. Conversation languished.

Presently George said wonderingly:

"Never knowed Samanthy go to bed with a headache. Hope she ain't sickenin' fer the diphtery."

He looked anxiously at his mother, remembering well that dread visitation and the awful headache which had preceded his own illness.

"Rubbish!" replied Mrs. Spragge. Then she added tartly: "Men allers expect womenfolk ter be up an'

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about till they drop. You guessed right fer a wonder. Samanthy, pore child, has bin overhet."

Hazel displayed a slight confusion which George failed to notice. He did remark, however, with bounding pulses, that she looked prettier than ever, and more alert. He decided that she was the "brightest" thing he had ever beheld. What a source of light—and heat! In her turn Hazel was struck by George's appearance. He, too, was glowing with health and excitement. Each glance that he bestowed upon his beloved expressed a high note of approval. He was awaiting, in a fever of delightful anticipation, her "nod." Meanwhile, he laughed at his mother's petulance.

"'Pears to me, Maw, that the sun's warmed you up considable!"

He turned to address Hazel:

"I saw that colt this afternoon. It's all right, quite frisky agen."

Hazel gave a little shiver of disgust.

"Ugh! I hate to think of it. Has any human being ever been bitten in these hills?"

George glanced at his mother warningly. But Mrs. Spragge was looking at Hazel.

"Two children," she answered.

"Did they die?"

Mrs. Spragge nodded.

"A sad mishap. The parents was neighbors of ours, Pikers, a shiftless lot. The man never did clean out anything outside the shack, an' the woman was jest as bad inside. I've often thought to myself 'twas as well the children was took."

"But how were they taken?" asked Hazel, leaning

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forward, her face aflame with interest. "Surely, they were not bitten at the same time?"

"Yes, they was."

George tried to interfere too late.

"Now, Maw, what's the use o' rakin' up them stories? Hazel won't sleep ter-night."

"Please go on, Mrs. Spragge."

"It seems the mother was washin', an' the two children was playin' around. They was three an' four years old, little girls. I mind 'em well, because I'd given 'em some frocks."

She sighed heavily.

"Presently," continued Mrs. Spragge, "the mother noticed that the babies had wandered off, but she went on with the washin'—mighty slim her washin' used ter be! I mind me ther wasn't a garment on her line that a Spragge'd hev worn. Wal, after a time she found the little girls. They'd gone into an old shed. They was both dead, bitten in half a dozen places. The hull shed was alive with rattlers."

"Oh!" gasped Hazel. Her face became the color of milk.

"The mother went crazy fer a time. They abandoned their claim. We run our cattle over it. Nobody took it up. I dessay the shed is still thar, an' a breedin' place for rattlers."

Her voice died away. Hazel soon recovered her pretty color, but Mrs. Spragge exhibited a strange listlessness. The telling of her grim story seemed to have affected her. Her eyes lost their fire. She relapsed into silence. When supper was over she rose wearily and began to clear away, refusing Hazel's offer to help.

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George began to fill his pipe; Hazel walked to the open window. Mrs. Spragge coughed nervously.

"I've a something ter say, George."

George stopped filling his pipe. He noticed an odd quaver in Mrs. Spragge's voice. She continued:

"Mebbe I'd oughter hev said it before." She was gazing sorrowfully at her son. Now, with a slight change of tone, she spoke to Hazel, challenging her attention instantly: "George has bin a good son to me. We've hed no trouble—*none!*"

As she spoke George moved nearer to her with a smile upon his pleasant face. No outsider beholding those two could have questioned the absolute truth of what the mother had just said. Between them existed that tremendous bond which is quite independent of blood. Each understood the other, because they happened to be alike in character and temperament.

George exclaimed proudly:

"We couldn't hev trouble, me an' you, Maw. What ails ye?"

"I'm older, my son. Lemme finish! Thar might be trouble 'twixt me an' you, big trouble, if I held my tongue ter-night. When you marry, an' I want ye ter marry, yer wife must be mistress in her own house. An', so long as I live, I reckon ter be mistress in mine. We've never talked o' dividing things, but I'm ready to git outer this house when you say the word. Or, if it suits ye better, I'll stay right here, an' you build lower down the Canyon, whar there's a fine site. We kin divide up the land an' stock, or not, jest as it pleases you. You've a plenty o' money to fix yerself up in real good shape. And—ther's another thing—I sha'n't be traipsin' in an'

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out of yer home, upsettin' yer wife. Samanthy an' me'll git along fine. I allow that she's the only woman in the world that I could live with in peace an' comfort. That's all."

Hazel saw that George was petrified with astonishment and intensely moved. She may have realized the nature of the bond between these two persons, as she gazed keenly into her lover's troubled face. For the moment he had forgotten her. His eyes devoured his mother; his outstretched hands were eloquent of a protest which he was manifestly unable to put into words. Mrs. Spragge dominated him by force of habit rather than by superior strength of character.

"Sep'rate?" he ejaculated.

She bowed her fine head.

"It ain't possible, mother."

"It—must—be—so."

He sank into a chair, hiding his face in his hands. Hazel turned again to the open window, peering out into the night. She could hear the creek on its way to the ocean, and the chorus of frogs; she could smell the pungent odors of sage and tarweed, but she could see nothing except the soft, velvety darkness outside which seemed to encompass her even as it encompassed the Canyon which she hated. For the moment the future seemed to be blotted out together with the past. The present remained, dark and mysterious.

Mrs. Spragge went into the kitchen, leaving the man and maid alone.

The Way of a Maid with a Man

II

Something of her magnetic influence may have gone with her. Hazel's first feeling, undoubtedly, could be recognized as a sense of gratitude. Mrs. Spragge, wittingly or unwittingly, had spared her an odious task. But gratitude became tempered by the reflection that Mrs. Spragge was making another task much more difficult. Nor could she doubt that George's mother knew this and had planned to rob her of a sharp weapon, or at least dull its edge. The justifiable plea that it is inexpedient for a young wife to live with her mother-in-law would have made it easy for Hazel to propose, with generous altruism, the giving up of the homestead to the mother. Upon some such lines she had prepared her plan of campaign. She hoped, of course, that the suggestion to leave the ranch would emanate from George first, after she had whispered softly: "George, dear, do you want your wife to become a cipher in your house?"

Now, quite suddenly, she realized that such *finesse* would be futile. Nor could she hope that George would give her time to make fresh plans. In a minute he would speak with that inherited directness of speech which she feared and detested. In fine, a crisis had been precipitated by Mrs. Spragge. Gratitude fled! The instinct of self-preservation took its place. If George spoke tempestuously she might be carried away on a flood of emotion. Let her then speak first.

She touched his arm timidly. He raised his head. She saw tears in his eyes, a face twisted by distress.

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"Don't say anything now," she whispered. "I know how you feel."

Her voice was sweet, very beguiling, brimming with sympathy. George rose up, shamefaced, dashing the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand.

"I couldn't help it."

"Why! I love you for it. Any woman would!"

"Let's go outside," he said.

She hesitated, afraid of the darkness, but quick to understand that talk in the parlor might be interrupted by Mrs. Spragge. Supper things must be removed, order must be reestablished.

She followed him on to the front porch, down the steps, and as far as the bench upon which she had sat with Wilbur. After all, it was not so very dark. The stars were shining with misty luminance, heaven seen through the haze of earth. As she followed her lover with what he may have taken to indicate obedience and sweet humility Hazel decided how she would deal with him, whereas a wiser and older woman might have considered how a strong, passionate nature would deal with her, and have thus prepared herself against emergency. It never occurred to her, for example, that she had overplayed her part. She had come too close to George; she had touched his arm; he had felt her soft breath upon his cheek, and its warm fragrance intoxicated him. Lastly, her beguiling words, "I love you for it," indicated, surely, that barriers were broken down.

When they reached the bench he turned swiftly, took her in his arms and began to rain kisses upon her hair, her eyes, her lips. She had wondered what passion was like. At last she knew.

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We must admit that she had been kissed before. Tarrant had kissed her cheek, a tentative salute, provoking Hazel's wrath and Tarrant's stammering proposal of marriage. Her lips were virgin.

For a moment Hazel remained passive; then, whirled out of herself, she clung to George, not yet returning his kisses, but giving herself up to them. She was filled with an enchanting satisfaction, a heavenly lassitude, a relaxation of tired, overstrained tissues. George lifted her from the ground; she closed her eyes.

"Oh! you darling!" he murmured.

He sat down, holding her upon his lap, pressing her to him. Presently he laid his head against her bosom and then exclaimed joyously:

"Gee! Yer dear heart beats as hard as mine. You sweet love!"

Carried away by this, almost swooning with emotion, Hazel kissed him. George heard her breath sob in her throat; he felt her small, soft arms encircling his neck; he believed—fond fool!—that such a surrender must be unconditional.

In a triumphant voice he exclaimed.

"Now yer breathin' deep an' good."

She made no reply. Her lips came eagerly to meet his.

III

Such moments would not be so deliriously obsessing if they lasted. Generally, moreover, they are interrupted, and the spell is broken. In this instance the slamming of a window above the porch, the window of Samantha's bedroom, hurled Hazel from heaven to earth. Sa-

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mantha, indeed, was sitting at her window when the lovers left the house. Some of George's impassioned words drifted to her unhappy ears. She had listened, shamelessly, unable to tear herself away. Then, in revulsion, she had tried to close the window. She had meant to close it noiselessly. The warped, ancient frame stuck; a too violent effort betrayed itself.

"That was Samantha's window," said George.

She knew from the tone of his voice that he was miserably conscious of Samantha's eavesdropping, conscious, also, of what she must be suffering.

Passion departed—as it had come—swiftly.

Hazel slipped from George's lap. He made no effort to detain her. She sat beside him, thinking, knowing that he was too distraught to think as she could and did. She smiled in the darkness, well pleased to discover that reason could reassume its sway over the emotions. Reason told her that George was in her power, that he would grant anything she chose to ask.

She put her lips close to his ear.

"Samantha loves you, George."

He gave a groan more articulate than any words.

"That just settles it," said Hazel firmly.

He said slowly:

"Settles—what?"

She took his hand, holding it tenderly.

"How I hate to hurt you!"

"Hurt me? You?"

"I must hurt you. Your mother hurt you just now. She was quite right, and you know it. She will always be mistress in her own house. And you would wish me to be mistress in mine."

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"I dunno! I'd never faced that till this evenin'."

"You must face it—now."

"I s'pose so. Yes," his tone became more hopeful, "we kin build lower down the Canyon. 'Twon't be necessary to divide the land, or the stock neither. Things'll pan out right."

"They might," said Hazel, "if it were not for Samantha. And it would be cruel to ask her to leave your mother; but is the Canyon big enough to hold her and me?"

"You ain't ever goin' to ask me to skin out?"

"Isn't it your duty, dear?"

"Not much."

"Wait. I'll tell you something. Mr. Stocker, who came here to-day, wants me to marry him."

"I suspicioned that. Can't say I blame him."

"Would you like him to be living within half a mile of us, upon intimate terms, dropping in and out of the house when you might be away, fussing over me if I chanced to be feeling not quite myself? Would you?"

"I'd break his dam neck," he replied fiercely.

"I'm sure you would. I should feel like that toward Samantha, and she, poor dear, would feel like that toward me."

"I ain't goin' ter leave Spragge's Canyon."

"But if it were to your real advantage to do so——?"

"It ain't."

"Oh, George, you want me to be proud of you, surely."

"Ain't you proud of me?"

That loosened her tongue. She had accomplished the first task. He was ripe for argument, willing, at any rate, to listen to what she wished to say, the words so dili-

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gently rehearsed, so purged of offense, so delicately incisive. She knew her powers of speech; and the effect of them upon a man of action could be measured.

"I'm immensely ambitious for you, George. I have only one fault to find in you. You are absurdly modest. You are quite unconscious of your own strength. Perhaps that is what attracted you to me, a weak little girl. I have always longed for a man who could carry me to heights."

The image was ill-chosen. George remembered the pinnacle and that perilous descent.

"Heights make you dizzy, Hazel."

"Don't remind me of that! All the same what you did captured me. Well, it is not enough to capture a woman. After you've got her you have to keep her."

"I kin keep you right enough, my pretty."

Again his seizing of the literal meaning disconcerted her.

"Keep my mind and soul, I mean."

Was this a flight beyond him? Apparently not, for he answered soberly:

"I aim ter keep every bit of you."

"How do you propose to do that?"

This flustered him, for he detected a derisive inflection, but he replied stoutly:

"When you was in my arms jest now, didn't they tell you how tight I should hold on to my wife?"

"That was physical. Your grip relaxed because a window slammed. Oh, George, we love each other in—in that sort of way because we're young, but what will keep us together when we're old?"

She hid her face on his shoulder, and immediately

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his arm stole round her waist. He whispered softly:

"I kin answer that, my sweet. Why did I love my old dog that died las' fall? He wan't no use after quails or ducks; he wan't good fer nothin' 'cept ter lie around in the sun, but the mem'ry of what that thar old dog used ter be, the times we jest hed together when he was young an' spry, that keeps my heart still warm fer him. And it'll be the same with us, Hazel. I don't think I'm one ter change. Human bein's, an' animals, an' land gits a-holt o' me."

His simple honesty baffled her. And it is fair to add that it appealed to her enormously. She knew that this man would not change. He would love faithfully to the end. And this knowledge tickled her vanity because she told herself that other girls of her acquaintance would not have recognized so swiftly this great attribute of fidelity and loyalty.

She assailed him again.

"I told you that this ranch was too small for you. I meant it. I want you to take your right place among the men of the West, the men who are making history and building up this splendid State."

"Ain't I helpin' ter do that?"

"Of course. I'm not belittling what you've done, dear. But I should be miserable if I thought you were going to stop growing. Because you have done much, and done it well, I ask you to go on and do more—and more."

"As how?"

Fluently, but restraining her own eagerness, she outlined her plans: the buying of an interest in some business which his special knowledge would expand, a

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wider intercourse with men like himself, strong of body and stronger still of purpose, the gradual emancipation of a mind still hampered by the fetters of an insufficient education, the steady climbing, higher and ever higher, of one who had shown that he could walk with unfaltering courage where others dared not tread.

He listened patiently, making no comment whatever till she had finished. He was not aware, of course, that many of her phrases, and these not the least convincing, had been borrowed from an eminent publicist who had lectured in Oakland and elsewhere upon "Growth." In a general way, he accepted what she said as true; not for an instant did he suspect that at heart she was more concerned with her future than his; he was overwhelmed by her cleverness. And yet, he remained of the opinion, that he, personally, would attain his full growth in Spragge's Canyon, and nowhere else.

As Hazel finished speaking the moon swam into view above the hills to the east of the ranch-house. George muttered something. It will be remembered that during the afternoon he had crossed the fresh trail of a buck; and he had satisfied himself that the beast was lying in some thick brush not far from a small spring. He had walked to the spring, finding, as he had expected, more sign. Nobody knew better than George what deer would do under certain conditions. Given a very hot afternoon, a stag, with the velvet still on his horns, would seek the thickest chaparral and lie down. He would begin to feed when the moon rose and would stray nearer and nearer to his accustomed drinking-place. George had intended to reach the spring before the moon rose, be-

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cause the stag, if irritated by flies, would drink before feeding.

Moreover, it was quite possible that the wary creature might detect the taint of man when it reached the spring. In that case, it would snuff about cautiously and then trot off. Weeks might elapse before it would return to the same spot.

Let it be recorded, also, that George's failure to procure venison for Hazel had stimulated unduly the *ardor venatoris*. Mrs. Spragge had teased him a little, accusing him of falling asleep. When he beheld the moon, George thought of the stag. Also, he wanted to escape from Hazel's words, which buzzed like angry bees in his head. He told himself that he would be able to think things out in the hills. Yes, he must tear himself from this beguiling, sweet-voiced maiden, and at once.

He said abruptly:

"Say, let's go to bed."

Hazel was astonished. Pride, however, assured her that no offense was intended. She rose up.

"You heard what I said, George?"

"You bet. Mebbe yer right; mebbe yer wrong. Anyways, I've got to think it out by my lonely. I've got the hull night to think; I shan't sleep any; I'll jest be wrastlin' with yer idees. Ye never expected an answer ter-night, did ye?"

"N-n-no."

"Good."

Then he kissed her masterfully, but she experienced none of the sweet, thrilling emotions of the first embrace. The maiden had grown cold. She realized that he had accepted her surrender as unconditional. She

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disengaged herself, murmuring something about the moon and Samantha's window. George respected these reasons as valid, and all the time he was thinking: "I've got my darling and I'll get that buck—*sure!* It's my night out!"

As Hazel slipped from his arms after a last kiss, she said:

"Don't tell your mother till to-morrow."

"Right."

In silence they entered the house together. A small lamp was burning on the landing. George looked into the kitchen as Hazel ascended the stairs. The kitchen was dark; Mrs. Spragge, evidently, had gone to bed. George glanced at Hazel's slender figure as she tripped lightly up the creaking stairs. When she reached the landing he kissed his hand. She smiled, blew a kiss to him, and entered her room.

She was sensible, as she found herself alone, that this memorable evening had come to an abrupt and unsatisfactory close. When the moon rose, at the very instant that she stopped speaking, George had muttered: "Geel!" Hazel was quite sure that her words had not provoked this familiar exclamation. Something else had challenged George's attention.

What?

She went to the window and sat down. George was in his den below. She could hear him striking a match, hear him moving about. He moved quickly, as if he were in a hurry. Within a minute he left his room, but Hazel's sharp ears failed to catch the click of a turning key. He went into the kitchen. Upon the landing was a small window facing east. Hazel's room faced

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west. The girl stole on to the landing, slipping silently to the window. Between the back door and the barn was an open space, white in the strong moonlight. She could see George crossing this bit of ground. He was carrying his rifle; and he walked with the even stride of a man who has a definite object in view. Hazel returned to her room.

CHAPTER XIV

CROTALUS HORRIDUS

I

HAZEL was very intelligent—in streaks. She had, indeed, a happy knack of doing and saying the real right thing, a knack almost perfected by much practice. At the same time it must be admitted that her perceptive faculties manifested themselves obviously and under normal and commonplace conditions. The true, perhaps the only, test of the highest intelligence is afforded when conditions are abnormal and unexpected. Upon such occasions Hazel behaved foolishly.

At this crisis in her life she was absurdly and unreasonably upset because mystery presented itself. As a child she had been afraid of darkness; she could not sleep unless a night-light burned in her bedroom. Moreover, during those impressionable years between leaving school and meeting George Spragge she had been accustomed to gratify every reasonable and many unreasonable fancies, and, being an orphan with sufficient money of her own, she was able to do what she wanted without consulting anybody other than a meek and complaisant aunt. Let it be premised, also, that a woman's sense of honor (and humor) may be as sensitive as a man's and yet differ from it very materially.

After seeing George sally forth furtively armed with

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a rifle Hazel fell an easy prey to a perfervid imagination. She could have told you, with surprising cleverness, what Wilbur Stocker would or would not do under certain given conditions. She could "size up" such a man as Clinton Tarrant, a more complex personality than Wilbur. But George still remained an unknown quantity. Herein lay fascination and fear.

It is fatuous to argue that she ought to have discovered within a few hours of making his acquaintance George's essential honesty, his ingenuous sincerity, his artless incapacity for all such tricks as distinguished Bret Harte's Heathen Chinees.

Any girl solidly intelligent would have done so.

In Oakland, let it be added, poverty was not held to be a synonym for honesty. Poor and dishonest had become a *cliché*. Poverty in the West is regarded as such a disability, such a stigma, that one is tempted to affirm positively that a successful train-robber is less of a discredit to the Golden State than a "poor white." Hazel, moreover, had been taught to look upon squatters as poor whites. When she realized that the Spragges were squatters she jumped to the conclusion that they must necessarily be poor and, if poor, probably dishonest. When, further, she discovered that the Spragges were not poor, but, in their way, exceedingly prosperous, she wondered how much prosperity had come about. All her friends made money, or lost money; they never grew rich by saving. In short, George—and probably his father before him—must be engaged in some secret and illicit business!

She began to undress.

Although no pledges had been exchanged, she knew

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that she ought to regard herself as George's promised wife. As such George had agreed to share his secrets with her.

Logically, there must be secrets.

Unhappily, carried away by emotion, she had allowed her lover to embrace her ardently, returning his embraces without first learning the nature of those secrets. In cold blood—and as she sat alone in her room her blood was cool—she felt that George had taken advantage of a loving girl. She admitted candidly that George and she were “engaged,” and yet a secret stood between them which might nullify that engagement and make marriage impossible.

On the morrow, also, George might declare obstinately his intention to remain in Spragge Canyon. If so, what would she do?

Resolving this problem, her heart beat faster; her blood grew warm again. Undeniably she wanted George more than ever. And, supposing that he refused to cut loose from this hateful ranch, she possessed sufficient self-confidence to believe that ultimately she would triumph over his obstinacy. In short, nothing stood between her and her life's work but a green box which lay downstairs in an unlocked room!

The house was quiet. Mrs. Spragge had fallen asleep, for Hazel could hear her heavy breathing. From Samantha's room came no such reassuring sound. Samantha, probably, lay awake, with nerves on edge. Samantha had sharp ears, and the wooden stairs creaked.

Hazel got into bed.

It is significant that she didn't say her prayers, although she brushed her hair as carefully as usual. Be-

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tween her room and Samantha's was a thin partition of wood, canvased and painted. Hazel closed her eyes in the hope that hearing might become more acute.

Yes; Samantha was awake, and weeping. Stifled sobs penetrated through the partition.

Hazel felt sincerely sorry for her. At the same time, with her lofty ideal of what a Woman of the West ought to be, she could not escape the conclusion that Samantha lacked proper pride. A decent girl with a trained sense of obligation to her country and herself would not fall desperately in love with a man unless she had reason to believe that such love was returned. The corollary of this self-evident proposition struck her with unpleasing force. Had there been love passages between George and Samantha? She ought to have asked that question when Samantha's window slammed. Why didn't she?

Samantha was a decent girl. Had George tampered with this ingenuous and affectionate creature?

These questions were corroding. They ate insidiously into a self-respect dependent upon circumstances and surroundings rather than force of character. It may sound absurd, but in Oakland, within an easy walk of the First Presbyterian Church, Hazel would have resisted valiantly the temptation to sneak down creaking stairs and examine a green box belonging to somebody else. In this wild Canyon, away from Auntie mine, thrown upon her own resources, she salved a too sensitive conscience with the reflection that the end—a proper understanding of George—justified the means.

For an hour at least civil war raged within her.

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II

Opportunity ended the conflict. Samantha, wearied by too much weeping, fell asleep. Hazel could hear her breathing "deep" if not "good." George, of course, might return at any moment. If she intended to clear up this ridiculous and exasperating mystery she must act at once and lay aside for the first time in her life maidenly delicacy and fear.

She was trembling as she slipped out of bed.

Fortunately the moon was now shining brightly. It would not be necessary to light a candle. The night was very warm, almost stiflingly so. Hazel put on a thin silk dressing gown. Her slippers were ornamental, embellished by high heels. She decided to walk barefoot.

She opened her bedroom door, pausing to listen with her pretty head on one side. Mrs. Spragge's heavy breathing purred on comfortably. Samantha, seemingly, slept as soundly.

Hazel descended the stairs.

In the small, narrow hallway below she paused again. Fear left her; excitement usurped its place. After all, this was an adventure and she began to taste its sweets.

One little—peek!

The rusty key was in the lock. Hazel turned the handle of the door. It opened easily and silently. She entered. The moonlight was so strong that every object in George's den became clearly defined. Hazel closed the door.

She stood in the center of the room, looking about her. The window, she noticed, was shut, which accounted for an oppressive warmth. For several hours

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during the afternoon the sun must have shone full upon it. Her nostrils were assailed by that odd, musty odor, at once familiar and yet unfamiliar.

Her first glance over this den upon the day after she came to the ranch had been fleeting and unsatisfactory. Much may be gleaned from the careful inspection of a room; and Hazel fully intended to harvest all that was possible.

Upon the table were jars and old cracker tins pierced with holes. Hazel was not interested in these. The jars held live frogs. The collecting of frogs might indicate a harmless interest in natural history. Colored plates, illustrating birds and eggs, hung above the mantel shelf. In a corner of the room was a shotgun, well polished outside. In another corner were fishing poles, a gaff, and a landing net. Fishing gear lay upon two chairs. The floor was encumbered with traps for small animals, gum-boots, and boxes of cartridges. The bureau alone seemed to be kept in order. It was open and Hazel beheld pigeonholes filled with neatly docketed bills and papers, a ledger and small cash-book, pens, ink and paper. Obviously, in business matters, George was methodical. Another chair stood near the table. Thrown across the back of it was the gunny-sack which George took into the brush hills. The forked stick and a pair of wooden pincers challenged her attention. Beside these lay a thick leather gauntlet.

The long green box stood upon the floor, between the table and the window. Hazel decided that it was not a Wells, Fargo box. Nevertheless it must have been designed to hold something of value. Had she examined the two ends, which she did not, she would have seen

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that they were perforated with many small holes, and this might or might not have afforded a clue. Hazel's attention was concentrated upon the lid. It seemed to be made in three parts, but only the middle part had hinges. The lid, indeed, appeared to be unduly small. It was fastened by a padlock which hung open from a steel staple.

Hazel lifted the lid.

The box was empty.

She could not help laughing. What a sell!

III

By this time she had decided rightly that the box was intended to carry small animals, possibly some rare specimens of otter or fox. It smelled evilly.

She decided to abandon a futile quest. The atmosphere of the room was stifling. Yes; George was collecting some rare species of animal. But why make a mystery of that? Once more curiosity ravaged her. Why did he take a rifle into the hills—at night?

There must be—there was!—something secret.

She glanced about her even more attentively, checking each object. To the right of the door was an old packing case, four times the size of the green box.

This was George's cunningly constructed tank for live rattlesnakes. When he first began to add to his income by collecting these reptiles this tank used to stand in one of the sheds near the barn. Twice the reptiles had escaped, once through misadventure, another time through malice. Upon the first occasion a tragedy might have taken place, for a child playing about the shed had

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opened the sliding panel at the side of the tank. When a rattler wriggled out the child scampered off, terrified. The snakes vanished; the child made confession. Upon the second occasion, some enemy, possibly a disgruntled Greaser sacked for indolence, had kicked in the panel, which, after the child had tampered with it, was kept padlocked. George, much incensed, decided to keep the tank in his den. Mrs. Spragge and Samantha raised no objections. They were accustomed to rattlers, and not afraid of them. Also, the tank was so cleverly designed that the reptiles could never escape of their own volition.

A word about the tank.

It was lined on three sides and the bottom with sheet glass. The lid was double, the outer of wood, the inner of fly-proof wire netting, such as is used in making meat-safes. In the day time George would leave the top lid open, closing it at night, because all snakes are susceptible to cold. The snakes which he captured in the brush hills were shaken out of the sack into the tank from the top. But when the prisoners had to be transferred from the tank to the green traveling box more caution was observed. The fourth side of the tank was lined with zinc sheeting. Upon the level of the floor George had made a tiny door, which had aroused the curiosity of the child. Sliding this open a couple of inches, and arousing the snakes inside by a sharp tap on the lid, a head would appear to be deftly and gently seized by the wooden pincers. The wriggling reptile would then be dropped into the green box down a short length of stovepipe.

Hazel stared at the tank, seeing only a strong packing-

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case and wondering what it held. Then she approached it. Her bare foot was within a few inches of the sliding panel. The top of the tank was covered with gray blankets, such as Californians use when they go camping. She did not lift them or touch them.

Standing there, wondering vaguely what this huge box might contain, she felt rather ashamed of herself. Uneasiness of mind bred uneasiness of body. With her hand she touched the box, pushing it. It did not budge. At this moment she saw the sliding panel, manipulated by a brass knob.

Why a sliding panel?

The padlock had been removed because George kept his room locked.

Hazel's curiosity was becoming attenuated. She had just decided that she must wait till the morrow and learn George's secret from his own lips. Her interest in the sliding panel was not concerned with this secret. She would have described it as legitimate and intelligent. An unobservant person would never have noticed the sliding panel.

Tentatively she pushed the brass knob with her foot, exercising little pressure, not wishing to open the panel, ready to return to her own room, and yet oddly sensible that something held her in this evil-smelling den.

The panel yielded.

As it slid back she heard a faint rustling. And then a flat head glided through the small opening. Hazel sprang back, gazing at a snake, fascinated by horror. A second head appeared. She beheld lidless, baleful eyes gleaming with opalescent light.

They were rattlesnakes.

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A third head, moving more swiftly than the others, broke the spell of fascination. Too frightened as yet to scream, palsied in her mental activities—for she might have opened the door and escaped—Hazel shrank back, still staring at the reptiles. By this time the first snake had glided between her and the door. Choosing the wrong moment Hazel tried to slip round it. Instantly it coiled and rattled. The girl had never heard this awe-inspiring sound, which struck terror to her inmost fibers. She sprang upon the chair near the table. Safe for the moment, her wits partially recovered. The other snakes coiled and were rattling. Nine in all had escaped from the tank.

She began to feel faint and dizzy. The strong musty odor became overpowering. Sweat broke from every pore in her skin; her throat became parched; her fingers twitched. No such horror had ever attacked her before. She had not believed it possible that such horror could be, such disintegration of bodily and mental power. She knew nothing of the habits of rattlesnakes. She imagined—as many do—that they could move more swiftly than a man can run; probably they could climb trees—and chairs!

Dominating these thoughts was the memory of the children found dead by a distracted mother. She pictured their little bodies swollen and discolored. She envisaged once more the monstrous head of the colt.

What had she done during her innocent life that this hideous suffering should be imposed upon her? For she was suffering actual pain. A rigor shook her as a terrier shakes a rat. Her mind was in torment, a mind in thrall to a body not too strong and extremely sensitive to

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emotion of any kind. The deadly nausea increased; the disgusting smell grew even stronger. The room, be it remembered, was as hot as an oven, a fact which accounted for the activity of the crotalines, normally passive or lethargic at such an hour. Hazel glanced at the window. Could she open it and escape that way. No; already two of the snakes lay between her and it. Despairingly she realized that she dared not move.

Meanwhile they had ceased rattling and silence became more oppressive than noise. Five were gliding hither and thither, searching—so Hazel concluded—for her! If they raised their flat, hideous heads they would see her.

A minute passed.

Childish rage against George possessed her. Why had he lured her into this den of serpents? Well might he be ashamed of this horrible traffic in venomous reptiles!

She thought of Wilbur, asleep in his bed at Aguila. She thought of Mrs. Spragge and Samantha slumbering heavily upstairs.

Suppose she screamed? What a relief? What a balm! But the terrible snakes, now mercifully unable to see her, would hear that scream and attack her before help could be rendered. She beheld herself wreathed with serpents, each awful beast with its fangs buried in her soft white flesh!

It was not yet eleven o'clock. Was she fated to stand upon this chair till George returned home?

The conviction gathered strength that her physical powers were failing. The horrible nausea became more acute, the dizziness was overmastering her. On the cliff

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she would have reeled and fallen into the abyss below had she been alone. In a few minutes she would reel and fall from the chair.

With a tremendous effort she rallied her enfeebled energies. Snakes lay to right and left of the door, but the narrow path to safety was clear for the moment. Had she known anything whatever of the habits of snakes, who, with rarest exceptions, never attack man, she would have descended quietly from the chair and walked as quietly to the door, being careful not to excite the reptiles by any violent movement. They would have wriggled away into corners.

She was wearing a long nightgown and a wrapper with what is called a "tail" to it. It did not occur to her to lift these clinging garments so as to leave her limbs free. Instinct invited her to jump.

She might have armed herself with the forked stick, which lay close to the chair. The present writer remembers a piteous case of drowning. A strong swimmer became entangled in weeds. His intimate friend, who could not swim, waded within a few feet of the drowning man. Palsied by misery and impotence, he beheld his friend sink, and afterwards close to the spot he discovered a long pole!

Hazel jumped.

She landed upon the floor with a bang, plunged forward, tripped over her night-gear, and fell. A second later she felt a sharp prick upon one of her bare feet.

She screamed.

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IV

Hazel's scream awoke Samantha, but for the moment she supposed that she was suffering from nightmare. She sat up in bed listening. The door of George's den slammed. And then she heard a soft dull thud. After that—silence.

Samantha, as we know, had cried herself to sleep. By an odd coincidence she, too, had left out her prayers. Hazel, possibly, forgot them; Samantha did not forget them. For many days, morning and evening, she had repeated her artless formula, entreating Omniscience fervently to save her George from a wretched marriage. To-night she abandoned faith in prayer because she was convinced that her passionate invocation had been ignored. She was still child enough to think that God was angry with her; child enough in her turn to be angry with God, and to withhold what she had been taught to believe was an act of allegiance to Him. Her heaven had fallen; she lay crushed beneath its ruins.

Her mind naturally dwelt upon this as she sat up in her hard, narrow bed, listening for George's step upon the stairs. He had come into the house with Hazel; and she knew that he had not gone to bed. Later, like Hazel, she had heard him moving about his den. When he went out through the kitchen she guessed that he was after venison for Hazel. The last straw! He could sacrifice a fourth night's sleep for *her*!

Her first thought was that George had shot his fat buck. Probably he had packed home the haunches. He had done so before. Obviously, too, he would replace his rifle and dump the venison on to the floor.

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Nevertheless the bleak silence chilled her.

She got out of bed, still listening. She opened her door. The small lamp burned on the landing. She saw that Hazel's door was open and a moment later she saw, also, that the guest-chamber was empty.

She jumped to the conclusion that Hazel must be with George, and her blood grew hot at the thought.

The silence became more bleak. By this time her mind was working with feverish activity. She decided that George had not returned. The scream, then, must have come from Hazel. She was downstairs—alone.

But what was she doing in George's room, the room that no woman entered, the Bluebeard's chamber which already had provoked curiosity and questions?

Suddenly she divined the truth, or part of it. Instinct revealed it in a blinding, stunning flash. Hazel, knowing that George was in the hills, had gratified her curiosity and something awful must have happened!

What?

She thought instantly of the snakes, the only source of real danger. For all she knew to the contrary, there might be two or three in the traveling box. If Hazel lifted the lid any snake inside would immediately attempt to escape. Many a time she had watched George handling the reptiles, shutting the lid upon a wriggling head, which would then withdraw. Hazel, she decided, must have peeped into the green box; a snake had shown itself; she had tried to shut the lid and had been bitten. Then she screamed. What would happen next? She would escape from the room, slamming the door. Safely outside reaction must follow. Such a girl as Hazel would collapse into unconsciousness, not the result of

Spragge's Canyon

the bite, but of terror and shattered nerves. Her prehensile imagination grasped another fact. She was certain that Hazel lay senseless in the hallway below. And so she would go on lying while a subtle poison sped through her veins. Pain from the bite would come later. She remembered the endless talk about the Piker's children. There had been loose hay in the shed. Tumbling into it they had disturbed a colony of rattlers. Each child had been bitten in several places. Death had come swiftly. All this was embodied in the coroner's verdict. But Hazel's case was different. Granting that she had been bitten once, probably in the hand, prompt treatment might save her life. First aid was simple. A ligature must be tightly bound above the puncture. The puncture ought to be freely lanced and then sucked. This done the issue lay with the nearest doctor and God!

Samantha began to tremble.

She had just passed through a heart-breaking experience which left her weak and despairing. She had seen the man she loved in the arms of a girl she hated; she had heard his first impassioned words. Till that poignant moment she had hoped against hope that a union between two persons likely to bring misery to each would never take place. She had believed, poor creature, that her great love for George would prevail in the end, that he would come back to her when this city madam revealed herself as she really was.

Remember that she was a child of the wilderness, trained by necessity to fight for her own hand, accustomed to and perhaps slightly hardened by the never-ending struggle of primitive existence, with none of that

Crotalus Horridus

sentimental regard for the sanctity of life which distinguishes the civilized woman of cities. She killed creatures bred and nourished by her—chickens, ducks, turkeys; upon one horrid occasion she had slain a pig. George was away from home. Mrs. Spragge and she, sorely against the grain, acted as butchers. Once, too, she had shot a horse, cruelly mutilated by barb-wire.

Temptation assailed her, as it had assailed Hazel, but with far intenser virulence. The city girl's upbringing, her overstimulated intelligence and curiosity, incited her to meddle with matters that did not concern her. Samantha, on the other hand, ever since she was old enough to act had been compelled to give her attention and intelligence to the simple tasks which engrossed her. She had no time to mind affairs other than her own. Temperamentally, also, she had no inclination. Live and let live is a law of the wild. Curiosity, in fine, is too dangerous an instinct to be gratified.

She told herself, miserably, that she did not *know* what had actually happened downstairs. Hazel, of her own free will, had chosen to pry into George's private affairs. Let her bear whatever punishment might be imposed!

She moved a couple of steps toward her room, and then paused again.

She was too honest to deceive herself. If she went back to bed she would go with the deliberate intention of letting Hazel perish! If Hazel were not bitten, if she had escaped injury, and had merely fainted from over-excitement, Samantha's resolution to leave her alone would remain forever an indictment against common

Spragge's Canyon

humanity, a fierce desire that a woman should die because another woman hated her.

Thus she faced the issues.

As yet no appreciable time had been wasted. Possibly half a minute might have passed since Samantha awoke.

"Let her die!" said Samantha.

She spoke in a whisper, but the sound of her own voice pronouncing sentence produced an amazing effect. For an illuminating instant she became able to view herself with detachment. And then something within her answered:

"No."

Such an instinct cannot be identified. It is generally irresistible, whether it be termed the still small voice of conscience or the ineradicable habit of ministration. Samantha could sit up all night with a sick calf and keep delicate young turkeys in her bedroom.

She sped downstairs.

In the silver moonlight lay a crumpled heap of what appeared to be shimmering silk.

CHAPTER XV

SAMANTHA

I

SAMANTHA half lifted the unconscious girl and propped her up in a sitting position against the wall. She handled the soft, limp body vigorously. Beneath Samantha's shaking Hazel recovered consciousness. She opened her eyes and sighed. Then, seeing Samantha, reading the questions in her eyes, she began to tremble violently.

"What has happened?"

Samantha's voice was hard and masterful.

"Oh! Those snakes! I have been bitten, bitten!"

"Whar?"

Hazel thrust out her foot. Upon the arched instep was a drop of blood hiding two tiny punctures.

Samantha drew in her breath. Then it was true. And the issues became clear as Californian sunlight. If this foolish, city-bred girl died George might return to her. She was strong enough, comely enough, loving enough to make him return. Harsh experience had taught her the inevitability of consequence.

Well, let the pretty fool die! Let the stronger survive, the cardinal principle of life in the wilderness.

She stared at the drop of blood, dark against the white foot. Had the color been scarlet, arterial instead

Spragge's Canyon

of venous, nothing could have saved Hazel. Samantha knew that.

The second struggle ended as swiftly as the first. Samantha seized her stout nightgown and tore from it a strip of linen.

"Sit still," she commanded.

Swiftly she wrapped the linen above the slender ankle. Then she rushed into the kitchen, returning with an iron skewer. She began to tighten the ligature till Hazel protested.

"Stop yer noise!" said Samantha. "Ye'll be worse hurt before I'm through with ye."

She dashed again into the kitchen. Hazel closed her eyes, to open them upon a flash of light. Samantha had lit a candle and was trying the edge of a knife upon her thumb.

"Don't scream!"

Hazel set her teeth, remembering what George had done to the colt. She realized that Samantha was intent upon saving her life.

Samantha lanced the wound till the blood flowed freely. She bent down and began to suck fiercely at the punctures. Hazel was too weak to resist, hardly able to understand what was being done.

"Now," said Samantha in the same hard voice, "I'll fetch Aunt Almiry. Don't you move. Moving makes the blood circulate faster."

She ran upstairs.

Presently Mrs. Spragge appeared. The two women carried Hazel to her room and laid her flat upon her bed.

"Whar's George?" asked the mother.

Samantha

"I dunno'. Somewheres in the hills, watching out fer deer."

"And how did this happen?"

Hazel, not Samantha, explained feebly. Mrs. Spragge went downstairs and returned with the key of the den.

"George might hev blundered in."

"Make a poultice of the weed, and an infusion," said Samantha. Mrs. Spragge nodded.

"I'll ride fer Mr. Bungard, Auntie."

"He ain't much good."

"Mebbe he knows what drugs ter use."

"Mebbe."

"I'll ride George's pinto."

"Wal—don't spare him."

Hazel listened and shuddered. Then deadly sickness overcame her.

II

Within ten minutes Samantha was on her way to Aguila, taking the short bridle-path across the hills familiar to her from childhood. The hamlet slumbered; not a light gleamed even in Pat Hennessey's saloon. Samantha drew rein at the drug store, slid from the panting horse, and rang the bell furiously. Presently a head was thrust out of a window and a petulant voice was heard:

"Quit ringing that bell! What do you want at this hour?"

"The Perfessor," shouted Samantha. "Case o' snake bite."

"Mercy! It's you, Samantha. Who's bitten, child?"

Spragge's Canyon

"Miss Goodrich. Where's the Perfessor, Mis' Bungard. Thar ain't a minute ter lose."

"Mr. Bungard is in San Lorenzo. He returns to-morrow."

"Dear! Do you know what drugs oughter be used?"

"I don't—I don't. And there isn't a soul in this village who would know. My! How awful! That nice young girl!"

Samantha went back to the pinto, hearing inarticulate questions from the ex-schoolmarm, but paying no attention to them. She had to act quickly, to make a big decision. She could ride to the county town, nearly eighteen miles distant, or try a ten mile cut across the brush hills to Roblar, where there were sulphur springs of some repute and a doctor.

"Where are you going?" shrilled Mrs. Bungard.

"To Roblar."

"You'll never make it by night."

"I'm goin' ter try."

She was already in the saddle. Bending down, she patted the wet neck of her horse.

"Yer work is cut fer ye," she whispered.

The pinto stretched himself into a gallop, for a mile of straight county road lay in front of him.

"Kin I do it?" thought Samantha.

She sailed on smoothly till she came to the parting of the ways. Leaving the road, she plunged into the brush, following a narrow track which led to the summit of a divide. Only once before had the girl traveled this rough road. On that occasion she had helped George to drive a bunch of calves to Roblar. The difficulties of that particular job remained green in her memory.

Samantha

George had never attempted such a task a second time.

She walked the pinto up the steep incline, slipping from the saddle and leading him. Fortunately the moon, although waning, shone bright in a cloudless sky. On the summit she paused for an instant. The wildest part of a wild county lay in front of her, gorge and gulch, scrub-oak and chaparral, a labyrinth through which she must find her way. Below she could hear the yapping of a coyote. This was a sanctuary for all wild things, and her pulses thrilled because she felt as wild as any of them.

"We must take chances," she said to the pinto.

The descent was sharp, a rough sidehill honeycombed with squirrel holes, spotted with loose rocks and stones, but free from brush. Straight as a line sped the horse.

Samantha leaned back, giving the animal a loose rein. If he stumbled, he would turn a somersault, rolling over his rider, crushing her beneath his weight. Samantha hoped that she would be killed outright if such an accident happened. Badly injured, she would die by inches. They reached the bottom and the pinto stopped trembling upon the edge of a wide gulch, a recent wash-out crossing the trail at right angles.

"No time to go around," said Samantha, addressing the horse. She let him look at the gulch. Then she walked him back, patting his neck and talking to him coaxingly. She felt sure that he understood.

"Now!"

She went at the gulch top speed. Upon the ragged edge of it she raised her arm and struck hard with the rawhide quirt.

She was over.

Spragge's Canyon

Samantha gave a shout of triumph. In her mind the gulch presented a test case. If they leapt that, Roblar would be reached.

Struggling through the brush, scourged by the manzanita, she lost the trail half a dozen times and as often found it again. At last, breathless and quivering with fatigue, she gained the second summit, higher than the first. She was half way to Roblar.

A bad quarter of an hour followed. The trail, after leaving the summit, wound through a wild gorge. A hundred feet below was a watercourse, a roaring torrent in the rainy season, dry in summer. Above impended a wall of rock. Samantha noticed with dismay that the rough path had crumbled away in places; big boulders lay upon it and small heaps of shale. Obviously, this trail must have been abandoned by the few squatters who used it to pack grub to their claims.

Why?

Unable to answer the question, knowing no other road, she pushed on. Very soon she had to dismount and lead the pinto. More than once the horse pulled back, snorting and trembling, as displaced stones crashed into the watercourse below. The path became more narrow, so narrow that retreat might be impossible.

"We won't go back," said Samantha.

Suddenly the trail widened, and the last half of this dangerous traverse was comparatively easy.

"All right now," said Samantha.

They were approaching a more fertile belt of country, part of a big rancho, once a Spanish grant. Samantha intended to make up time galloping across the smooth, undulating pastures. She was now less than five miles

Samantha

from Roblar as the crow flies, but, after crossing the rancho, a bad bit of country remained, impenetrable brush, if a traveler chanced to wander from the trail. As she galloped on she wondered why the trail through the gorge had been suffered to fall into such a perilous condition. What lazy, shiftless fools these squatters were!

Her mind at this moment no longer dwelt upon Hazel or George. She had concentrated all energies upon reaching Roblar; she could think of nothing except the trail, which seemed to grow attenuated as she advanced. Such as it was, it had been used for half a century.

What ailed it?

The question was answered. Right across it was stretched a barb-wire fence of six strands! Too late Samantha remembered that she had read of this fencing in the local paper. The whole rancho had been fenced and cross-fenced within the past six months. More, the original grant had been sold and subdivided.

She dismounted, staring ruefully at this terrible obstacle. Could she break it down? She tried to do so, lacerating her bare hands on the sharp barbs. The staples were new, driven securely into new posts. Two strong men with the proper tools might effect a passage for a horse after an hour's work. Or, it could be cut with pincers in half a minute!

Samantha computed distances. With a groan she decided that she dared not waste time by following the fence. It stretched for miles on each side of her; it passed over places where no horse could go, where a man might have to crawl.

To attempt to leap it was madness. The gallant pinto

Spragge's Canyon

would refuse. Californian horses leap wide gulches upon occasion, not wire fences.

She must leave him.

She tied him securely, not to the fence, against which he might have maimed himself, but to the stout branch of a live oak. She took off the saddle and blanket.

Then she climbed the fence and began to run.

Oddly enough, for the first time she was afraid. Californian girls do not go afoot through the wilderness, or through pastures where bulls are turned out. The chance of meeting a bull might be negligible, but it worried Samantha.

She followed the old trail, losing it and finding it again and again. She crossed three fences, tearing her canvas skirt to ribbons. Finally she struck the strip of brush between her and Roblar.

How she crossed it she never knew. Within two minutes she had lost the trail and she never found it. Roblar was within a mile of her and she steered due east by the stars. She ran across open spaces, tiny glades scattered here and there; she fought her way upright through thickets which might have daunted a curly-coated retriever. She crawled where she could not walk. Sharp flints cut her bare hands; her face was scratched by thorns, black with dirt, swollen and covered with weals. Yet she pushed on.

She was utterly spent when she reached the doctor's house.

Samantha

III

And unrecognizable! The doctor beheld a wild creature, presumably female, wearing rags, and hardly able to move or speak. But he guessed instantly that this was the result of some tremendous emergency. He gripped Samantha by the arm and supported her into his surgery, switching on the electric light.

"Water," gasped Samantha.

He poured some spirits of ammonia into a tumbler of water. Samantha drank it eagerly. Then she tried to speak, and failed.

"Take your time," said the doctor. "You want me, don't you?" She nodded. "I'll get ready. You will be better directly. Drink some more water, if you feel like it."

Samantha lay back in her chair.

The doctor returned in three minutes. He was a young man, not yet thirty, but he happened to be a Californian; and he had attended squatters in the brush hills, finding his way to their rough claims by brightest day and darkest night. He knew, also—none better—the difficulty of extracting a lucid statement from a squatter. Samantha astonished him when she said curtly:

"Rattlesnake bite in Spragge's Canyon. Young girl bitten on her foot, near the ankle. Done what we could. Tied it up good an' tight above the ankle, opened up the wound good an' deep, sucked it good an' hard, an' come fer you."

"You did all that?"

She nodded, faintly smiling. The smile was a grimace, but the doctor was not a slave to appearances.

Spragge's Canyon

"And how did you get here from Aguila?"

"Across the trail."

"There isn't a trail now."

"Can't we skin outer this? I'll talk as we drive along."

"One up on you," he remarked grimly. "It's a long way round, but my automobile will get there in less than two hours. There's no hurry."

"No—hurry."

Samantha sat up, staring at his grave face. He explained quickly:

"Practically you've done nearly all that is possible. If she lives, she'll owe her life to you. Everything depends upon how much poison got into her system, and the strength of that poison, which varies. It's a bad time of year for snakebite. There's no tremendous hurry, because she'll be past help when I get to Spragge's Canyon, or on the mend."

He went out.

Presently his wife came in bringing some hot soup, which Samantha obediently swallowed. The doctor's wife, snuffing out a heroine, fussed over her, bathing her face and hands, lending her another blouse and skirt. By the time the automobile was purring at the front door, Samantha had recovered her speech and her self-possession. She was snugly wrapped up in a warm cloak with a hood to it. The doctor tucked her into a fur-lined buggy-robe, and then mounted beside her. A thirty-mile journey over rough roads lay in front of them.

When the car was going smoothly the doctor said:

"Now—post me."

Samantha

She recited the facts without interruption.

He asked his first question:

"How much time elapsed between your waking up, thinking you heard a scream, and applying the ligature?"

"I dunno."

"A minute—two minutes?"

"Mebbe."

"Not more than that?"

"I can't say."

"It's like this. I remember a case of a rancher bit in the thumb by a big rattler. The man was pulling wood out of his wood pile. He had a chopper handy, and, by Jove! he'd grit enough to chop off his thumb there and then."

"Fer the land's sake!"

"The poison never got into his system at all. I had another case, an Irishman. He was burning brush. He got bit in the finger, but it seems he danced about abusing himself because he had left Ireland where there were no snakes. He was tied up some five minutes after the bite . . ."

"And he died?" Samantha asked breathlessly.

"He nearly died. Odd thing, for years afterward he suffered from blood-poisoning in May, the month in which he was bitten."

"We hev a bundle o' the dried weed."

"Don't believe in that. Say, you haven't told me one thing. How did this girl get bitten in the middle of the night?"

Samantha squirmed uneasily. Hazel was the Spragges' guest.

Spragge's Canyon

"Jest—curiosity."

"What?"

"George Spragge collects rattlers, sells 'em to a dealer. George keeps 'em in a tank. Miss Goodrich, who is visitin' us, was scairt o' rattlers, so George tole me an' Aunt Almiry to say nothin' about 'em. Miss Goodrich did ask me questions, and I surmise she couldn't make head nor tail o' my answers. George bein' out ter-night, after deer, she jest naturally thought she'd do some prospectin' on her own."

"I see," said the doctor.

Samantha volunteered no more information. She lay back, closing her eyes. The doctor thought that she was asleep.

IV

She was telling herself, with endless repetition, that if Hazel died it would be because first aid had not been rendered quickly enough. Hazel's death, then, would lie at her door. At this moment she might be a murderess! George, if he knew the truth, would so regard her.

The doctor heard a choking noise.

"What's up?"

"Nothin'."

The doctor thought to himself that she was overwrought—and no wonder!

"You have a cry, if you feel like it," he said kindly. "It'll do you a lot of good."

Apparently she believed him. For half an hour he heard sobbing. When the sobs ceased he remarked genially:

Samantha

"You're a wonder! That ride through the gorge. I know the place. Wouldn't cross it by daylight. And then leaving the horse! And that last bit of brush. Bully!"

"I might hev got to her sooner."

"Is that bothering you? Do you think I allow such thoughts to bother me? Not much! Sometimes I might get to my patients quicker. I like to finish my dinner. I just hate getting up nights. I'm not always as quick as I was to-night. Now, look here, don't you worry! I feel in my bones that this Miss——"

"Goodrich."

"Will show less signs of this night's work than you do. She'll be mighty sick, nausea of the worst kind, and her leg may swell up, but I'll bet a dollar you were in time."

"Mebbe," said Samantha miserably.

It was quite impossible to cheer up. Hazel's death meant an insupportable burden upon a sensitive conscience; the more sensitive, perhaps, because, for one or two minutes, it had been indurated by passion and hatred. If Hazel did not die, she would marry George.

Poor Samantha!

V

Dawn was breaking as the car rushed through Aguila. The sun shone far below the horizon, but silver streaks appeared behind the peaks of the Coast Range. The freshness of the morning cooled Samantha's burning cheeks and brow. In a few minutes the ranch would be reached. Samantha passed her fingers across her face, feeling the weals made by the manzanita boughs, wondering what she looked like in the cold gray light.

Spragge's Canyon

They crossed the bridge.

"Is that the bridge where those outlaws were lynched?"

"Yes."

"Served 'em right, eh?"

Samantha answered dully: "I dunno. I uster think that way."

"What made you change?"

"Mebbe they was driven to crime."

"Pshaw! Weren't they murderers?"

Samantha shuddered and made no reply. The lights of the house could be seen. There was a light in Hazel's room and in the parlor. As the car stopped, George hurrying down the steps.

"That you, Samantha?"

"How's Hazel?"

"She's alive."

"I've brought the doctor, George."

The doctor had jumped from the car as she spoke. George recognized him and grasped his hand, wringing it fiercely.

"Thank God, ye've come. She'll pull through now. Waitin' fer ye, believin' we was no good, mighty near finished her. We've filled her full o' whiskey."

"Please take me to her."

The two men mounted the creaking stairs. Samantha remained below. She heard Mrs. Spragge's deep tones; and then George's steps returning. She sat down in the shadow, turning her face from the lamplight. George came in and shut the door. He stood near her, staring at her, not recognizing the skirt and blouse. He began awkwardly:

Samantha

"Maw tole me what you done, Samantha. Suckin' the wound!"

"That's all right."

"Gee! I should jest say so! I got back 'bout half an hour after you went off. Whar did ye strike this Roblar doctor?"

"At Roblar."

"At—Roblar? Ye ain't bin to Roblar?"

"Yes, I hev."

"But how?"

"By the old trail."

He poured question after question upon her, which she answered in monosyllables, keeping her face in the shadow. His excitement told upon her. For the first time she began to realize what she had done, the tremendous feat of physical and mental endurance. She had a glimpse of herself as he beheld her. When she finished he cried out sharply:

"Samanthy, stan' up, an' look at me. Lemme look at—you."

She obeyed.

The light from the lamp fell upon her swollen bruised face. Not only manzanita but cactus, the wild prickly pear, with its venomous spines, had disfigured her. George groaned:

"Oh, my God."

She spoke quietly:

"I reckon I'm the awf'lest sight."

"An' you done this thing fer—her!"

Her eyes met his steadily:

"I done it fer you, George."

CHAPTER XVI

WILBUR AND HAZEL

I

GEORGE gazed deep into the soul of Samantha. Then, abruptly, he turned and went out of the house.

He waited on the front porch for the doctor to join him. It was nearly five o'clock and presently he could hear Samantha moving about the kitchen preparing breakfast. He rushed in excitedly, exclaiming:

"You go to bed, Samantha."

"No; I don't feel like it."

"You must be plum foundered."

"Mebbe you'll milk my cows?"

He nodded, retreating slowly, loath to leave her, but sensible that the situation was beyond his powers of speech. He had returned from the hills about three without any venison, arriving breathless and much perturbed, for he had seen lights in the house and knew that something must have happened. Hazel, by this time, was under the influence of the whiskey which Mrs. Spragge made her swallow in copious doses. In a few words the mother told her son of Hazel's misadventure. He had stammered out:

"Why in thunder did she go foolin' with my snakes?"

To this question Mrs. Spragge replied curtly:

Wilbur and Hazel

"When she's feelin' better you kin ast her."

But there was no need to ask. He was shrewd enough to guess right. Curiosity had beguiled her to pry into his private affairs. He suspended judgment, realizing that the punishment far transcended the crime. Mrs. Spragge told him, however, that, in her opinion, Hazel would recover. Her last words before she hastened back to the patient made a profound impression.

"Samanthy sucked the pizon from the wound."

George then entered his den after receiving the key, which Mrs. Spragge handed to him in grim silence. His first impulse was to destroy the snakes, every one of them. Candle in left hand, stick in right, he unlocked the door. Had he found one rattler prepared to show fight he would, assuredly, have despatched the nine. The snakes, however, had crawled into corners and under furniture. The tank was empty. George stood in the middle of the room. He noted the raised lid of the traveling box. Hazel had pried into that first. Finding nothing she had examined the tank.

He went out of the room. The snakes could be slain by daylight—or replaced in the tank. The lust to kill passed from him, leaving him curiously limp and indifferent. For the first time he was thinking of his well-beloved with detachment, peering beneath her white skin, comparing her with Samantha.

Suppose Hazel died——?

He decided that she would live, having tremendous faith in his mother's prognosis. He felt, also, an odd conviction that Mrs. Spragge would not lament Hazel's untimely decease; and, very slowly, Mrs. Spragge's unspoken contempt for the girl who was her guest per-

Spragge's Canyon

colated to George's marrow. He smoked many pipes and pondered many things in his heart till the doctor arrived. Inaction nearly drove him crazy.

II

An hour must have passed before the doctor came downstairs. George stared anxiously into his face.

"How is she?" he asked.

The doctor smiled reassuringly:

"You needn't worry. Close call, all the same. Fangs just missed a big vein. The prompt treatment saved her. There's about enough poison in the system to make her uncomfortable for a few days. Say, that cousin of yours is a star-spangled triumph. She took the old trail."

"I know."

"It's a record."

"That's so."

"I wouldn't cross that gorge by daylight. The path has crumbled away."

George nodded. It irritated him to hear this stranger telling him what Samantha had accomplished. He knew better than any other man in the county what she had done; and words seemed to cheapen her stupendous feat.

Samantha appeared, preceded by an odor of fried bacon and coffee.

"How's Miss Goodrich?"

"Doing fine! More scared than hurt."

"That's good. Will you please come in and hev' breakfast?"

"With pleasure."

Wilbur and Hazel

The doctor attacked the beans and bacon with appetite. While he ate he talked to Samantha, who refused to sit down. George went out to drive the cows into the corral and milk them. He walked jerkily and his thoughts were jerky also, jumping from Hazel to Samantha and back again. He kept on muttering to himself:

"It beats the band."

Mentally he was bruised and shaken. The first paralyzing terror that Hazel would die, his inability to "do" anything, the long wait for the doctor, these emotions had gone, but this new and extraordinary lassitude remained, and dominating it, adding enormously to his sense of helplessness, was the conviction that Hazel must hate his ranch, that, after such a terrifying experience, she would never consent to live on it. While he was waiting for the stag in the cool of the night he had made up his mind. Hazel and he would build lower down. And he would satisfy her ambitions by developing the water, and, possibly, boring for oil. She wanted him to "get there with both feet." For her sake, he would "get there." But in his own way, in his own God-appointed place. More, Hazel should not be kept a prisoner on the ranch. She would be able to spend her own income as she pleased. Periodical trips to Oakland, for example, with or even without him, would make things easier for the darling.

First and last, no matter what beguiling pressure might be exercised, he would not abandon his home.

"Never—by the Eternal!"

Now, as he milked Samantha's cows, he was miserably aware that his hopes had crumbled into sand. Impotence

Spragge's Canyon

began to consume him; he felt like a wild animal in the trap of a hunter; the teeth of the trap closed upon his heart, tearing it cruelly. When he carried the milk into the dairy Samantha met him——

"You'll hev to fetch the pinto, George."

She described the spot where she had left that gallant animal, and then went back to the kitchen. The doctor declared his intention of returning to Roblar. He had done all that was possible. Before he departed he rubbed salt into George's lacerated tissues.

"This Miss Goodrich," he said incisively, "is a city girl, so I understand."

"Yep."

"I don't think much of her."

George would have struck him had such a remark been made twenty-four hours earlier. Now he said meekly:

"Why not, doc?"

"She's your guest, and, I hope, a payin' one, and she's pretty, but there's no grit to her, no sand! Bit of a fraud, I reckon."

"That'll do," said George curtly.

"Why did she monkey with your rattlers?"

George remained silent. When the doctor had gone he went into the house and walked upstairs. Mrs. Spragge heard him and came out of Hazel's room. George whispered hoarsely:

"Has Hazel asked fer me?"

"No, my son."

"Shall I go in, Maw?"

"Wal, she's awful sick to her stomach. Give her time, Georgie."

Wilbur and Hazel

"I'll go fetch the pinto."

He finished the chores and saddled a horse. When he reached Aguila the hamlet was seething with excitement. Mrs. Bungard had spread the news of the snake-bite, confirmed by the doctor, who, when passing through Aguila, had added a few details.

Uncle Zed Byles irritated George more than anybody else. The old man stood by the horse with his hand on the horn of the saddle, looking quizzically into George's frowning face.

"What did I tell ye?" he asked, winking furiously.

"I dunno as you said anything wuth remembering."

"Yas, I did. I tole you Samantha was the salt o' the earth; and I tole you I hed no manner o' use fer city madams. This yere proves me right, George. What the h—ll was she doin' in yer room at midnight? Every man, woman, an' child in Aguila is askin' that question. Nosin' into yer private business—hey?"

"Cacklin' old hen, you air," said George fiercely. "Miss Goodrich, I'd hev you to understan'—an' all the other fools in town—is our guest, and kin go anywheres in our house, an' at any time."

He escaped at a gallop.

A remarkable experience followed.

Step by step he passed over Samantha's broken trail. He whistled softly when he came to the gulch, which he crossed lower down without leaping it. Then he entered the gorge, dismounting before he had ridden fifty yards. He had to advance cautiously, leading his horse, which jibbed as the path grew more narrow and crumbly. The critical moment came when the terrified animal refused absolutely to budge, pulling back with a violence

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which no persuasion could overcome. Finally, George had to return to the entrance of the gorge and hitch his horse to a tree. He might have fetched a wide compass by taking another trail, but he had sworn to himself to follow Samantha's road, because he wished to know exactly what she had done. So he tackled the gorge afoot till he came to the worst place, more perilous, inasmuch as the pinto scrambling after Samantha had dislodged what was left of the crumbling path. The sweat rolled off him before he reached the other side. As he wiped his forehead, he muttered:

"She done that—fer me."

The thought obsessed him till he reached the pinto, which neighed as he approached. Two hours passed circumventing the gorge. More time elapsed before he reached home, because he had to skirt Aguila, being unwilling to confront inquisitive villagers. It was nearly noon when he reentered the house.

His mother was in the kitchen.

"Hazel better?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. Did you see that buggy, George?"

"What buggy?"

"The one hitched to our rail. Mr. Stocker drove over not long after you'd left."

"Mr.—Stocker?"

"Yes, he's with Hazel now."

"The h—ll he is!" said George.

III

Wilbur woke up on that eventful morning feeling more than usually satisfied with himself and his future. Mr. Adolf Geldenheimer, for the moment, was identified with

Wilbur and Hazel

that future. He had demonstrated the possibility and expediency of rebuilding the ancient Aguila wharf; and it appeared more than likely that the millionaire owner of the big rancho would furnish dollars for such an enterprise, provided always that Adolf and Wilbur united to supply the needful experience. In a word, a cold business proposition, such as the soul of Wilbur loved. His thoughts concentrated upon this "snap." Now and again they flitted to Hazel. Country air and food had worked a miracle upon her complexion. What a sparkler! He pictured her sparkling, with the adventitious aid of diamonds, at his dinner table, doing the honors charmingly to "solid" men, and receiving afterward the society swells. That was the right way to do business, the only way to make a "ten strike." Hazel would be immensely popular. Everybody liked her. Certainly her great gifts would have been wasted upon Clinton Tarrant and that too supercilious Berkeley crowd. Yes—Hazel and he would make things hum!

He lay in bed gloating over a vast empyrean.

He was rudely awakened from these rosy dreams by Patrick Hennessey. Pat had his own way of breaking bad news. A ranch fire, for instance, destroying leagues of feed, seemed to provoke an essentially Hibernian hilarity. The joke was on the fellow who dropped the lighted cigarette into the bunch-grass! Pat was, of course, the life and soul of any funeral.

Wilbur heard a sharp tap at the door and opened his eyes to behold Pat's red face and white hair. He believed that Pat must be drunk. And intoxicated he was with excitement.

"Anything up?" asked Wilbur.

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"It's yerself 'll be up in a jiffy. The city madam at Spragge's Canyon, where ye wint yesterday, Miss Hazel Goodrich, purty little piece, has had the very divil of a night!"

"Wha-a-at!"

"Aaisy now! There'll be no funeral, glory be to God."

"No—funeral?"

"Haven't I just seen the doctor this minit?"

Wilbur shook him, shouting loudly:

"What has happened to Miss Goodrich?"

"She's been mixed up wid the business end of a rattler."

"Bitten?"

"To bits."

"Heavens on earth!"

A garbled account of the affair was poured into Wilbur's ears, as he dressed hastily. Pat, honest *raconteur*, was incapable of repeating a story without embellishment. Wilbur understood that Hazel had been attacked by half a dozen rattlesnakes, that Samantha had saved her after performing prodigies, and that the general excitement would culminate in a wedding.

"Whose wedding?" he asked, quite dazed.

"Sure, now, ye know that? Didn't the young lady come here to marry George? It's himself should 'av sucked the wound!"

"Hitch up that buggy I had yesterday," commanded Wilbur.

"Ah, now, ye'll have a bite o' breakfast. Niver take any road on an empty stomach."

Wilbur jammed on his hat without brushing his hair,

Wilbur and Hazel

which needed careful adjustment. Nearly as ignorant of rattlesnakes as Hazel, he exaggerated, naturally enough, the effect of their venom upon a fragile maiden. Bitten to bits! Unshaven, unwashed, pallid with fear, he did take the road to Spragge's Canyon with nothing to fortify his inner man except a drink of Bourbon whiskey. Hennessy's last words echoed in his throbbing head:

"Sure, it's a wedding, not a funeral, this toime!"

That, however, was the only part of the story which he deemed to be apocryphal.

IV

Samantha received Wilbur. The condition of her face justified his worst fears. He supposed it to be seamed and swollen with much weeping.

"Is she dead?" he gasped.

"Doin' fine," replied Samantha.

He hitched the horse, refusing the hospitality of the barn, still believing that he might have to drive furiously for the doctor. Why had the scoundrel left such a patient? He hinted as much to Samantha.

"More important cases to home," hazarded Samantha. Wilbur's distracted appearance exasperated her as indicating Hazel's power over men. Obviously, he expected sympathy and plenty of talk. Samantha was incapable of giving either. However, they went into the parlor, and Samantha took charge of Wilbur's hat. She thought that he looked very funny and "unstuck." At moments he appeared to lose control of his mouth; the lower lip wobbled. Samantha thought: "She'd never

Spragge's Canyon

take *him!*" Desperately anxious to see more clearly, Wilbur produced a pair of pince-nez, polished the lenses carefully with a silk handkerchief, and placed them upon the white, bony bridge of his thin nose.

"Tell me everything."

"I can't, Mr. Stocker."

"How did she get bitten?"

"I dunno. I wan't there. You must ask—her."

"Can I see her?"

"Mebbe."

"Please find out. If I can be of any service——!"

Samantha vanished. Wilbur felt indignant. What ailed the girl? Why couldn't she answer simple questions? What a clod! And what an idea, what a ridiculous, offensive notion, this gossip of a marriage between his Hazel and George Spragge! He drummed impatiently with his feet upon the rag carpet, taking note of the simple furnishings, appraising them. At a forced sale the lot might fetch ten dollars! It was sweet of Hazel to stay in such a shack. And this talk about a room full of rattlesnakes? What did that mean? His brain whirled. That was a lie. Hazel must have been bitten in the garden, such as it was. Probably she had slipped out alone, trying to escape from these boors. The lovely night might have tempted her to ramble farther than was prudent. In the grass by the creek she had trodden upon a snake.

Samantha came back. To Wilbur's amazement she was smiling, and the smile was curiously derisive.

"Miss Goodrich will see you presently."

His own smile became complacent.

"Thank you," he murmured.

Wilbur and Hazel

"Hev you had breakfast?"

"Breakfast? How could I?"

"Could you—now?"

A half-reluctant assent stirred Samantha to alacrity. Wilbur was conscious of a change in her impossible to define. Perhaps she was sympathetic, perhaps she was pleased that Hazel could see him. Presently she brought him a cup of tea, an egg, and some cold biscuits and butter. As she was placing these upon the table he said, irritably:

"That old fool, Hennessey, told me that Miss Goodrich was bitten *in* this house."

"That's quite right."

"How extraordinary! Do snakes come into houses at night?"

"George keeps 'em in a tank. He sells 'em. They're in there," she pointed at the locked door.

"And one escaped?"

"They all escaped. George ain't caught 'em yet. Would you fancy some beans and bacon?"

"No; thank you. Are—are there any snakes loose in this room?"

"I ain't looked fer any here."

She went back to the kitchen, still smiling.

V

When Samantha, in Hazel's presence, announced the advent of Mr. Stocker and his wish to see Hazel Mrs. Spragge had said tartly:

"See him? Of course she can't see him."

Till this moment Hazel had been lying flat on her back

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in bed. The violent sickness had been stopped by the doctor; and she had been able to swallow and retain some milk and water. Her foot was badly swollen and much discolored, but the swelling, greatly to the doctor's satisfaction, had not spread above the knee. Apart from the pain in her foot, which was not unbearably severe, Hazel was beginning to feel more comfortable. Her head still ached from the doses of whiskey, but all fear of death had passed from her. And, shortly before the arrival of Wilbur, Mrs. Spragge triumphantly announced that the swelling was less pronounced and less indurated, an effect she attributed entirely to the poultices made from the famous antidote in which the doctor, foolish man, placed no faith. He had said, however, that the poultices would help "some," although he hinted that linseed or even bread would be equally efficacious. Before he left Hazel had thanked him with a wan smile. At mention of Wilbur's name she raised her head from the pillow.

"I wish to see Mr. Stocker," she said quite firmly.

"Shall I tell him to come up?" asked Samantha, looking at Mrs. Spragge.

Hazel answered:

"In half an hour, please. I'll send word when I'm ready to receive him."

Mrs. Spragge shrugged her broad shoulders as Samantha left the room. Then her eyes sparkled as Hazel, in a languid tone, asked for her hand-mirror. Mrs. Spragge, who had never owned such an article, brought it. Hazel examined herself carefully. Her face, with its delicate features, was very pale, almost the color of milk, but otherwise she appeared not much the worse

Wilbur and Hazel

for the awful shock and fright. She remembered with a certain pride that the Daughters of the Golden West were distinguished by great recuperative qualities. Returning the mirror to Mrs. Spragge, she said not so languidly:

"Please give me my dressing jacket. It's in the top drawer of the bureau."

Mrs. Spragge made no protest. She found the garment, copied from a Paris model, and fetched two more pillows from her own room. Thus propped up in bed, Hazel, with a little help, achieved a becoming *toilette*. It was quite surprising to note how Mrs. Spragge encouraged her patient, entering with positive ardor into Hazel's scheme of decoration. Face and hands were bathed in cologne and water. The two big plaits were embellished with fresh ribbon. Mrs. Spragge remarked heartily:

"Why, child, you do look mighty pretty."

"I feel a wreck," sighed Hazel.

Mrs. Spragge, with calm, cryptic face, nodded sympathetically. She had hoped that George would see Hazel as she had been, a piteous spectacle; she rejoiced now with exceeding gladness that Mr. Stocker, and not George, had provoked this "fixing up." When all was accomplished she summoned Wilbur.

"You wish to see him alone, dear?"

"Please."

Wilbur entered a minute later. The sight of Hazel, looking like a beautiful child just snatched from the clutch of Death, moved him profoundly. Hazel was almost as profoundly moved by the appearance of Wilbur. Never had she beheld him unshaven and uncombed! He

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was at his worst, and she accepted that worst as confirmation strong and true of Wilbur's passion for her. When she held out her hand he fell on his knees by the bed, kissing it and repeating fervently:

"Thank God! Thank God!"

Hazel closed her eyes. For the first time Wilbur had given her a tiny thrill.

"Dear Wilbur," she sighed.

"Are you strong enough to speak?"

"I think so. I'm so glad you came at once."

"You knew that I would come?"

"Yes; I knew. Oh, Wilbur, I have been through the dark valley."

"Yes, yes—and I was fast asleep, dreaming of you, dearest."

This was not strictly true, but at such moments a lapse from the absolute truth may be dismissed as venial.

"I've been incredibly silly," murmured Hazel.

"Don't say a word."

"But I must. Wilbur, I'm not strong like you. You've always wanted me, haven't you?"

"Always, always, ever since we first met."

He remained kneeling by the bed, kissing her hand. She removed it gently and touched his head.

"I've been crazy, Wilbur. It's so difficult to explain."

"Don't explain!"

"Can you take me back to Oakland?"

"Of course."

"Oh, how I hate this ranch! How I loathe it, and—and my silly self."

A tear trickled down her cheek. Wilbur longed to

Wilbur and Hazel

kiss it off, but he was not as enterprising in love as he was in business. However, he grasped opportunity in his own fashion by saying with decision:

"The sooner you give me the right to take care of you the better."

Her pretty head fell back upon the pillows; her body seemed to be sliding off them.

"Raise me a little," she murmured.

He put his arms about her. She noticed that he had hardly strength enough to lift her properly, and she thought for a fleeting instant of other arms. The color came into both their cheeks.

"I must tell you how silly I've been, what a slave to mere appearances. Wilbur, I swear to you solemnly that I never saw you as you really are till you came in just now."

Wilbur, like all successful men of business, had inspired moments. The primal man had almost captured Hazel. His eyes sparkled with triumph, for mind had once more achieved a notable victory over mere muscle. He swooped unerringly upon another fact. Conquerors could afford to be generous.

"Hazel," he said solemnly. "I am real sorry for George Spragge; he has my entire sympathy. You imagined yourself to be in love with him."

"Wilbur, how clever you are! It was your cleverness which first attracted me. I feel, dear, that I can tell you everything."

She told him nearly everything, a story punctuated with soft sighs, moistened by tears, with eloquent intermittencies of silence. Wilbur was enchanted by her frankness, by her self-condemnation. He realized that

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such mistakes, if made before marriage, are not likely to occur afterward. Hazel had been foolish, but she had paid in full for her folly. She finished on a high note:

"Of course, you can never forgive me."

The kiss of forgiveness was just audible on the landing.

VI

Mrs. Spragge heard it. With regret must it be recorded that she heard, also, the talk which preceded the salute. Deliberately she played the eavesdropper!

Then she sought Samantha.

"It's O.K.," she remarked abruptly.

Samantha stared at her, quite unable to interpret the astounding expression upon Aunt Almira's face.

"O.K.," she repeated.

"They've fixed it up ter git married. I suspicioned it. I listened at the door, Samanthy, and I peeked through the keyhole. Her an' me's quits. She pried into my George's private affairs and I pried into hers. They're huggin' each other in a sort o' lukewarm, don't-muss-my-hair fashion. George put more snap into it las' night."

"Aunt Almiry! You know what happened las' night?"

"I seen 'em under the tree."

"So did I."

"You pore child!"

"What will George say?"

Mrs. Spragge frowned.

"I allow that's worryin' me considerable. George is capable of mos' anything. He's crazy fer Hazel. It's up to me to fix George, onless——"

Wilbur and Hazel

"What?"

"Unless you do it. I'm scared o' lettin' him see my feelin's. I hev'n't felt so spry fer years."

"It's goin' ter be awful fer George."

"Yes; he's built that way. Them two fools upstairs ain't yet taken into account the trouble he's liable ter make. She refused ter see him."

"I know."

"Kin you fix George, Samantha?"

She shook her head.

"Then it is up ter me. You understan', child, that I'm not worryin' on their account. If George shot the pair of 'em, I should say: 'Serve 'em right!' But this yere county ain't what it use ter be. If George pulls his gun, ther'll be bad trouble fer *him*. And he may."

Samantha considered this very thoughtfully.

"He didn't kill the rattlers," she murmured.

"Eh?"

"I asked him. He tole me that you'd given him back the key. An' he went in with a stick, but he didn't kill 'em. If he'd bin real boilin' mad I reckon ther' wouldn't be one alive now."

"That's so. But this dude, this thin, spindlin', yaller-faced smarty has downed him. And he's never bin downed before. Samantha, I could sing 'Old Glory'; I'm tickled plum to death; but back o' that I'm scairt—I'm scairt o' my own son."

Samantha took the elder woman by the arm, pressing it. Then she said slowly:

"Why should you speak to him, Auntie?"

"Somebody must."

"Let Hazel do it."

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"Fer the land's sake!" exclaimed Mrs. Spragge. "I never thought o' that."

"Ain't it up to her?"

"Sure!"

"I'd hate to be Hazel tellin' him," said Samantha slowly. "I'd sooner fool with a big rattler than with George."

CHAPTER XVII

DISLOCATION

I

MRS. SPRAGGE explained Wilbur's visit when George returned home. Her object was to prevent the two men meeting; and she reflected with grim humor that Mr. Stocker might be feeling even more nervous than herself. She said to George, in sober, matter-of-fact tones:

"Mr. Stocker jest hed ter call around. I'm expectin' the half of Aguila this afternoon."

"But why did Hazel see him alone?"

"Why, George, you never thought I'd go agen the doc, did ye? He sez to me: 'Let her hev her own way in small things.'"

"Mr. Stocker is—small," said George, "very small, but the idee of Hazel seein' him alone in her room, in bed, too."

"Propped up in bed, and wearin' the purtiest dressin-jacket. I aimed ter let the child hev her own way. She's allers hed it. Mebbe she wanted to send a message by Mr. Stocker to her Auntie."

"That's so," said George.

"I won't ask him to stay to dinner. Now, my son, I'd be easier in my mind if you caught them snakes."

"You ain't scared o' them?"

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"Hazel is, dear. Put 'em back into the tank. There's no kind o' sense in killin' 'em. Mebbe they'll help buy another dressin' jacket."

"I ain't goin' ter kill 'em," said George.

He went into his room. Crotalines were on the move, wriggling about, and quite ready to show fight, if molested. George opened the window which looked on the porch. He had caught two snakes and dropped them into the tank when he heard Wilbur descend the stairs. A minute later he could hear his mother taking polite leave of Hazel's visitor, and asking him perfunctorily to "call again." Wilbur promised to do so. He passed out of the front door, on his way to the buggy, and saw George at the window.

"Mornin'," said George.

"Good morning, Mr. Spragge. Very upsetting affair this?"

"Very," replied George. "Like to step in, Mr. Stocker, and have a howdy?"

Wilbur hesitated.

"I'm catchin' the rattlers," said George, in his most imperturbable voice. "Mebbe it would interest you some to see me at it."

"I will not disturb you," replied Wilbur hastily. "I'll call again to-morrow morning to inquire."

"Good," said George.

He went on catching the snakes till he had secured them all. By this time dinner was ready, but he had received no message from Hazel. Mrs. Spragge told him that she was resting, adding:

"I dessay she needs it after Mr. Stocker's talk. Won-

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nerful talker he is! We'll eat dinner alone, Georgie. I've got Samantha into bed at last."

"Samanthy," remarked George solemnly, "is a dyed-in-the-wool Spragge. I've followed her trail, an' now—I know."

Mother and son dined together in silence, each absorbed in thought.

II

Soon after dinner Mrs. Bungard drove over in Mrs. Geldenheimer's buggy and George tried in vain to evade the questions of two inquisitive women. This, of course, was part of Mrs. Spragge's carefully devised plan. She remained upstairs with the patient; Samantha lay in bed; George, therefore, sorely against his will, was constrained to entertain the visitors. Unhappily, he had not acquired the habit of lying. He loathed the necessity of "giving away" Hazel, but the horrid fact was soon established that a charming young lady from Oakland had poked her nose into Bluebeard's Chamber. Mrs. Geldenheimer treated the indiscretion lightly; Mrs. Bungard sniffed, as she murmured with disagreeable emphasis:

"Well, all said and done, I'm surprised!"

George felt easier when his visitors began to praise Samantha. Mrs. Bungard remarked mournfully:

"I do hope and pray that she ain't sucked any of the venom into her system. There's always that danger."

George was visibly impressed, wondering whether Samantha's retreat to bed might be caused by trouble more serious than mere fatigue and excitement. Mrs. Bungard added:

"We couldn't spare Samantha."

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Obviously it might be inferred that Mrs. Bungard could spare Hazel. This festered. George respected public opinion, although he never kow-towed to it. In Aguila the ex-schoolmarm directed and voiced public opinion. She might be deemed hard and exacting, but none questioned her sincerity and honesty. George remembered Mrs. Bungard's austere compressed lips when Hazel failed to "make good" upon the cliff.

Worse followed!

With a gay laugh Mrs. Geldenheimer put into words the thought gnawing mercilessly at George's vitals.

"My! How she will hate this place!"

"How do you know that?" growled George.

"Because I'm a woman, and city raised. When I first came here, Mr. Spragge, I was scared to death of the coyotes and the horned toads. If a rattler had bit me I'd have left Mr. Geldenheimer there and then."

"You would," observed Mrs. Bungard, "for good and all. It ain't likely that Samantha would have been around."

Presently the ladies drove off, taking with them enough authentic gossip to keep their tongues wagging for a week. George hurried upstairs. At Samantha's door he paused, listening. Then he tapped softly. Samantha's smooth voice was pleasant to hear.

"What is it?"

"It's me—George. Say, Samantha, how air you makin' it?"

"I'm lyin' here jest ter please Aunt Almiry. Mind you strip that red cow."

"You ain't got any pizon into yer system, hev ye?"

"What pizon?"

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"Rattlesnake pizon. You ain't got a sore place in yer mouth?"

"No."

"Any bad teeth?"

"Not a one."

"I reckon it's all right, but Mis' Bungard scared me. You jest stay in bed fer a week o' Sundays, if you feel like it. Would you fancy anything fer yer supper? A trout, or a broiler?"

"Mercy! I'd be ashamed ter lie a-bed and eat there! Go milk my cows."

He lingered for one more moment.

"Say, Samantha?"

"Well?"

"Yer the goods."

He turned away, glancing at Hazel's door, and coughing to attract attention, hoping that the door would open and that his mother would summon him in. If Hazel could see that Stocker——! A dull resentment began to burn within him. He pictured Hazel, propped up in bed, a sweet but piteous figure. He was longing to kiss and comfort her. He wanted to feel once more her kisses.

Why didn't she send for him? Was she afraid of him?

III

Mrs. Spragge heard his heavy step upon the stairs. She glanced derisively at her patient. The pretty dressing jacket had been removed. Hazel was resting quietly, but not asleep. After Wilbur's departure she was able to take a little solid food. Her foot was still exceedingly

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painful and swollen, but unquestionably she was mending rapidly.

"George wants to see you," said Mrs. Spragge.

"He'll be so angry."

"Because you peeked into his room?"

"Yes."

"You needn't to worry about that, dear. Better see him fer a minute, an' git it over. Then, mebbe, ye'll be able ter sleep."

"Perhaps I'd do well to see him."

"I think so. It's tough on him."

"Please pull up the blind. And—and tell George how very weak I am."

Mrs. Spragge found George near the corral and beckoned to him.

"She ain't worse?"

"She's doin' fine. You go up fer a short spell."

"Does she want me to go up?"

"She sent me fer ye. She's mighty near petered out, George. Go slow with her. She thinks yer mad with her."

"Mad? I am mad, jest crazy fer her."

Should she warn him? She decided not to do so. Hazel, she felt assured, would provoke no scene. Samantha had been right. It was "up" to Hazel to "fix" George. She would take her own time about it, pursue a policy of masterly inactivity. Safe in Oakland with the man of her deliberate choice, she would accomplish the final "fixing."

"I'll be in the kitchen," said Mrs. Spragge.

George hurried into the house.

Meanwhile, Hazel had heartened herself up by the

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exercise of a philosophy which had served her faithfully in other somewhat similar emergencies. She lacked, it is true, physical courage, but fortitude of mind she reckoned to be an inalienable possession. Habitually that mind dwelt upon the brighter side of things.

Laugh and the world laughs with you.
Weep, and you weep alone.

Mrs. Ella Wheeler Wilcox's famous injunction had been familiar to her since childhood. She knew that Auntie mine spoke of her to others as a sunbeam. She had illumined—at any rate temporarily—many lives.

She would add sparkle and brilliancy to the life of Wilbur Stocker.

This beautiful thought sustained her when she prepared to meet George. Wilbur needed her more than George. In a sense she was making an immense sacrifice in giving up George, but such renunciation of the flesh stimulated the spirit to finer issues. For the moment, also, her body was weak and in pain. That was the common lot of most women. Let the spirit, therefore, soar like a lark above the pitiful clay.

She divined, moreover, that her misadventure in George's den must discolor his mind and memory, even as it had discolored her pretty foot. The foot—she was comfortably assured—would recover its velvety whiteness, George's mind would retain an indelible mark. She felt that he would forgive her, but he was not the man to forget. The memory of these squatters for trifles was really uncanny.

She had leapt intuitively to another conviction. George would not leave his hateful ranch. If he hesitated, with

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her kisses still warm upon his lips, what likelihood could there be of his considering her wishes after cool reflection?

She was not propped up by pillows when he entered the room. She lay supine, with a sheet tucked beneath her dimpled chin. One small hand was exposed to view.

She wanted George to be shocked and moved by her appearance. He was. The afternoon sun streamed through the open window. No tinge of color tinted her white cheeks; beneath her eyes were purple stains; her lips might have been the lips of a child who had just died in its sleep.

George approached on tip-toe. He heard her murmur:

"Don't kiss me, George! Don't excite me! I feel so weak!"

He took her hand, and pressed it gently.

"Can you forgive me? I can't forgive myself. I am so afraid of you. You must be—furious."

"With—you?"

He fetched a chair and sat down beside her. She closed her eyes.

"Please pull down the blind."

He did so. It did not occur to him that it had been raised for a definite purpose. The blind was made of stout green canvas. Somehow George became affected by the twilight. She may have counted upon this. He realized that he was groping his way to a woman's heart through a baffling mist. Hazel's voice, so lifeless, so strangely cold, chilled him. She went on:

"Why did you not tell me about the snakes?"

A keener eye than his might have detected a semi-

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tone of petulance. He answered her at some length, clumsily alluding to her horror of the reptiles in Van Horne's barn. When he finished she asked another question:

"Why did you go out last night with a rifle?"

"To get venison for you."

"Oh!"

Everything became crystal clear. It is fair to add that she felt ashamed of herself, but this increased rather than diminished her resentment at being kept in the dark.

"You might have told me."

"I reckoned on surprisin' you. Venison ain't quite in season, but I didn't care about that."

"I see."

There was a long pause. George remained tongue-tied, unable to follow Hazel's thoughts. Then she said gently:

"I thought you might be doing something wrong, something against the law, something which might stand between you and me. You took me by storm last night, and—and I wanted to make sure."

He couldn't understand.

"What did you think I was after, Hazel?"

"It was so silly of me."

"What did you think I was after?"

He spoke inexorably.

"I—didn't—know. You told me that the squatters in these hills were not quite honest."

"You thought, mebbe, that I was like 'em—not quite honest."

She answered weakly:

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"I didn't know."

But he did. His mind worked slowly, far slower than his strong hands. Ironically, he said:

"You thought, mebbe, that I was a bad man."

"I was silly."

"Yes; you was."

She would not look at him, but she felt that he was looking at her, reading her, condemning her. His silence became excruciating. And yet, had she really understood him, she would have known that his heart brimmed over with tenderness, that the appeal of weakness to strength was irresistible, that the one thing which prevented him from taking her small body into his arms was the entreaty not to excite her.

She spoke first:

"Samantha saved my life. The doctor says so."

"It's a solid fact. Samantha made good."

The familiar phrase smote her sensibilities. Hazel thought: "He means that I have not made good." Wilbur was incapable of uttering a remark so tactless. She slipped her hand beneath the sheet, a significant shrinking from his touch which he failed to interpret.

"Samantha hates me, George."

"She tole you—*that!*"

"Of course not. I guessed. I don't blame her. I think her perfectly wonderful. She saved me, because she loved you."

How could he deny it? The knowledge made him scarlet. Hot within and without.

"Samanthy'd hev done her best anyhow."

"Oh, yes; but this makes it so much more wonderful. She might have let me die."

Dislocation

"What?"

He spoke incredulously. Hazel had questioned his honesty, and he had felt nothing but pity and perhaps a faint derisive amusement, but this indictment of Samantha filled him with indignation.

"You're crazy! I know Samantha from the ground up. We was raised together. Ther' ain't a softer heart in these hills, or a braver. She's jest like Maw. Why," his voice trembled and broke, "if a man dared tell me Samantha might hev let you die, I'd—I'd kill him."

"You'll kill me, if you talk so loud."

"I'm awful sorry, but Samantha is—Samantha."

"Because of that I am going to give you up to her."

IV

He became paralyzed by consternation and surprise. Beneath drooping lids, she marked the effect of her words. She was quite prepared for a passionate outburst, primal violence, to be controlled and exorcised by sighs, quivering lips and tears. His reply when it came seemed ridiculous:

"Gee! It's the pizon, or, or the whiskey."

Then he laughed!

But his hands were clenched and she could see the great muscles of his arms rigid beneath his thin sleeves. The veins stood out upon his forehead. Hazel trembled and thrilled. He might have recaptured her had he crushed her to him, pouring out the passion which he suppressed for her sake. She faltered:

"You laugh."

"I was thinkin' o' last night. And, ther's another

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thing. Do you suppose Samantha 'd take your leavin's?"

"George, I am too tired, too weak to argue with you. It has been a dream this past fortnight, but I am awake. You may be right. I am poisoned against Spragge's Canyon and your ranch is—you."

He bent forward till his face was close to hers.

"Is that your reason?" he demanded gently.

She temporized.

"Reason enough, surely?"

"The only one?"

"N-n-no."

"Is there another man back o' this?"

Hazel made no reply. She had never given George credit for perspicacity, believing, with urban conceit, that ranchers were dull of wit and comprehension. They are, indeed, amazingly shrewd in regard to anything which affects their own interests, indifferent rather than stupid only about outside matters.

"Tell me! Is it—Stocker?"

She dared not answer. Can we blame her for hiding behind a woman's greatest bulwark—physical infirmity. She shuddered, closed her eyes, and lay perfectly still. George rose to his feet.

"You have answered me," he muttered.

She heard the door close behind him.

He had gone quietly—out of the room and out of her life!

A sigh of relief fluttered from her lips.

Dislocation

V

In the kitchen he found his mother busy as usual with the simple tasks which had brought happiness and peace. Instantly she knew that a rupture had taken place. She confronted a furious man with calm, compassionate eyes.

"She's no use fer me, mother."

The words burst from his lips with devastating violence. Swiftly he continued:

"You left her alone with that dude, that slick talker."

"I did."

Would he curse her? She was prepared for anything. Her face hardened into a grim mask; the likeness between them became extraordinary.

"You are glad?"

"I am."

He moved a step nearer, rigid with rage and indignation.

"Do you think I'm a goin' ter take this lyin' down? Do you think I'm a goin' ter let any woman fool me? Is that what you think?"

"Pshaw! Go down on yer knees, my son, an' thank God because another man has taken a load off ye. She'll be a heavy burden to him, as she was to you when you toted her down the cliff. Yer strong, George, but yer not strong enough to carry Hazel Goodrich. Glad? Yes, I am glad. I'm so glad that I feel like takin' them rattlers back into the chaparral and givin' 'em their freedom."

Drastic treatment this! Too drastic, perhaps.

"You don't know all," he said sullenly. "Las' night

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she lay in my arms; her lips was quick to meet mine. She was mine then, all mine. An' now—*his!*"

"Wal, that ought ter turn yer stomach. Git out, an' be sick! Throw it up! Git rid of it fer ever an' ever."

He answered as grimly as she:

"I'll fix him first."

"How?"

"You kin leave that ter me."

"Kin I? Not much. It makes me feel mighty mean to hev to tell my son what ter do. I reckoned him big enough ter git along without proppin' from a woman."

"That'll do."

"No; ye'll jest hev to hear me out. You stan' thar with yer fists clenched, 'most ready to strike yer own mother. Ye look big as a barn, but ter me ye've dwindled into a baby agen. Yes, you hev. I'm sorry fer ye, George, because it's the first time ye've bin badly hurt, but I thought you was man enough ter take the lickin' ye deserve."

"That beats all! *Deserve!* Thunder!"

"I mean it. You stole Hazel. Stole her from the place whar she belongs, brought her here agen what judgment she may hev. You thought, in yer conceit an' fullishness, that a spindlin' plant like that 'd thrive in our brush hills. But she knows better than you, my son. If she married you an' tried ter live here she'd die, wilt away. She's bin mighty near death sence she kissed you. I was clost ter death when I bore you, George, an' it opened my eyes, I tell ye."

She paused, noting the effect of her words. George's face remained sullen and impassive, but she perceived

Dislocation

that the muscles of his body had relaxed. She laid her hand upon his shoulder. Her voice softened:

"You take a lesson from Samantha."

"Samanthy?"

"Las' night she saw you an' Hazel together. So did I. Mebbe it was the bitt'rest moment of my life. What was it to her? Think, if you kin, of her feelin's. She loves you jest as you love Hazel. An' she saved Hazel, because she loves you. If you love Hazel good an' true, do what Samantha done. Think of her happiness afore yer own. Let her go to a fittin' mate." A harsh laugh broke from her. "An' that, George, will be punishment enough fer Mister Stocker."

Never had she spoken at such length. When she finished, a reaction manifested itself, for the strain upon a woman past middle life had been very great. How would he respond? Beneath the stress of this poignant anxiety her limbs trembled; tears came into her eyes. She beheld him, as she had said, a baby, the only child that was left. Desperately she clutched him, thrusting his head down upon her bosom, knowing that a disease more deadly than diphtheria had stricken him, that he, too, might be taken. Her grip was so fierce that he struggled to release himself. She gripped harder. Suddenly he ceased struggling; her strength prevailed. She began to murmur his name, crooning to him:

"Georgie—Georgie."

Then her tears rained down, falling copiously after a long period of drought, percolating swiftly to his arid tissues, softening them, melting the iron in his heart, washing away the rage and fury.

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Presently, as her grip weakened, he raised his head and kissed her. It became his turn to comfort and console. He had not done so since his father's death.

She had conquered.

CHAPTER XVIII

READJUSTMENT

I

OCTOBER comes a-tip-toe to Spragge's Canyon, bringing with it graces and benedictions instead of equinoctial gales. The strong trade wind ceases to blow; the fogs, so frequent in summer, rest upon the ocean rather than the land. The pastures are gray and brown during the day, but in the early morning and late evening they shine and shimmer with all the tints of the opal, giving promise of the blazing colors which the rains duly bring forth. It is holiday time for ranchers who are not dairymen. The crops have been harvested; the ground is too hard to plow; the berry season is over; the cattle have been sold.

George loved the fall of the year, because he could spend long hours in the hills shooting quail, or on the rocks below the condor's eyrie, fishing for cod and pompano, or hidden in the tall *tules* waiting for the mallard and canvas-back ducks.

He had passed through August and September alone with his mother, for Samantha was away, visiting a maternal uncle in San Clemente. She wished to go, and Mrs. Spragge was too wise to protest, although the work of the house fell upon her. She may have hoped that George would have missed Samantha, but he did not

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say so. Indeed, he said little, going about his work in silence, rarely seen in Aguila, giving undivided energies to building a dam for the irrigating of the land below the bridge.

Hazel married Wilbur at the end of September. The event was paragraphed in the *San Lorenzo Tribune*, with an editorial comment, reminding readers of the paper that Miss Goodrich had been bitten by a rattlesnake in Spragge's Canyon. George read that paragraph after supper one evening, and later, smoking his pipe while Mrs. Spragge sewed, he said abruptly:

"When is Samantha coming home?"

"Do you want her to come home, George?"

"Why not?" he asked, with slight irritation.

"Mebbe she's happier in San Clemente."

"Does she write that to you, Maw?"

"No."

"This is her home."

Mrs. Spragge went on sewing. George refilled his pipe, staring at his mother, who was looking older and grayer.

"If she don't come home," he said curtly, "I reckon I must engage a hired girl."

"No hired help fer me," said his mother.

"Then Samantha must come back. You write her."

"I hev."

"What she say?"

"She ain't answered my letter."

"You go fetch her."

"She'll come back when she's good an' ready."

"The house seems lonesome without her."

Mrs. Spragge looked up sharply.

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"Am I ter tell the child that?"

"Yes; you kin tell her I said so."

Nothing more passed between them.

II

Samantha, however, remained in San Clemente, and, daily, George waxed more impatient at her absence. His mother could not guess what was in his heart. The question—would he marry Samantha—engrossed her thoughts; she lay awake hoping and praying that things would come just right; she yearned more than ever for the touch of little hands; sometimes, when the sun was declining and the long shadows stole across the hills, she could hear once again the patter of tiny feet, the joyous laughter of children, the artless prattle which often, as a young woman, she had silenced too imperatively, with a gesture or a word. And then, if she happened to be alone, and she was much alone, her knitting or sewing would drop from her tired hands and she would sit gazing into a future which would be cold and dark as the grave if her dreams did not come true.

She knew that George was suffering. Night after night he would pace up and down his room, treading softly, so as not to awake her; and his vigils left their mark upon her face.

She dared not speak of Hazel.

One morning he said abruptly:

"Look ye here, Maw, you go fetch Samarth. You need her."

"What you mean, George?"

Then she had a glimpse. He shuffled uneasily; a

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frown formed itself between his blue eyes; he was unable to meet her placid glance. Obviously he did not know quite what he did mean. In her slow drawling tones she said with emphasis:

"It's like this, my son; Samantha may hev found in San Clemente what we can't give a young an' healthy woman."

"Found—what?"

"A mate."

George's face became as inscrutable as her own. She continued:

"Samanthy ain't a fool. Her head is level. She ain't got any highfalutin' idees. I reckon she knows that God A'mighty meant her to be the mother o' strong, happy children. And any man, as is a man, lookin' into her heart 'd know that it was so. She sot her mind on you, my son, an' it must hev bin gall an' wormwood when she found out that ye'd no use fer her. Wal—that's back talk. Before she left Spragge's Canyon I tole her what I felt about it. I sez straight: 'Samanthy, George ain't the only clam on yer beach.'"

"You said that?"

"I did. I've seen a sight o' women eatin' out their hearts, growin' old an' ugly an' cross, because they was fools enough ter b'lieve thar was only one man in the hull wide world fer them. I'd be mis'able if Samantha thought that-a-way. Yas, it's more'n likely that the child stays on in San Clemente because Mr. Right is thar, an' Mr. Wrong is here."

"Mebbe," said George quietly. "All the same, Mother, you go see. Stay over a day or two. I'll bach it."

"Go yerself, George."

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"No."

He went out of the room. Mrs. Spragge allowed herself to smile. But soon the smile faded and an anxious expression replaced it. George—how could she doubt it?—wanted to experiment. He was not sure of himself. Such an experiment might be disastrous for Samantha, cruelly unfair to her.

Nevertheless after another week had drifted by she went to San Clemente.

Samantha returned with her.

III

There had been no misunderstandings between them. Bluntly, Mrs. Spragge told the precise truth.

"I want ye, child. I miss ye sorely. Yer my own daughter, an' you know it. I'd give my right hand ter be able ter say, honest, that George wanted you. He may. I dunno. He's taken things hard. He's that kind, and I wouldn't hev him different. I've a notion that the boy don't rightly know his own mind, but he misses you around the house 'most as much as I do. Wal—ther' it is."

"I'll come home," said Samantha softly.

Her blooming appearance astonished and distressed George. She had "fined down." She was wearing more becoming clothes. She had almost an urban air. She slid into her accustomed place so easily, so smilingly, that George was constrained to make invidious comparisons between her mental condition and his own.

To her son Mrs. Spragge remarked casually:

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"Samanthy's folks hated to let her go. I hope she won't find it dull after that gay little town."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed George.

The old life began again with the welcome rains. George plowed and harrowed and cultivated from dawn till sunset. Samantha went back to her cows and pigs and poultry.

Winter came, hardly recognizable in this land of perpetual spring, where the live-oak and the chaparral remain eternally green. The nights, not the days, grew cold. In the open fireplace of the parlor logs smouldered till George piled on the fir cones. After supper they would sit facing the hearth, talking over the incidents of the day, planning for the morrow. Such talk had seemed to Hazel confoundingly dull. It was never dull to the Spragges. It strayed hither and thither, seldom leaving the ranch; it halted perpetually, even as a creek may vanish to reappear, bubbling joyously, farther down its appointed channel. But an observer shrewder than Hazel would have remarked that the talk, however desultory, indicated purpose and design; it betrayed artlessly the aim of each speaker, the desire and determination to profit by past mistakes, to reap the harvest which springs from ever-recurring blunders quickly recognized as such, to try, with incredible patience, new methods likely perhaps to fail in their turn, and—above all—the overpowering necessity of adapting means to ends, of making bricks without straw, of developing all the resources of a tiny world without seeking aid from outside.

This is the vital principle of the West, or of any new country. The civilization built upon such laborious endeavor stands upon solid rock. In fine, the talk which

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Hazel despised, the memory for trivial details, the endless repetitions, constitute in their sum a declaration of independence—the charter of the pioneer.

Thus the winter passed.

IV

Spring crept on to the hills and into the valleys. The yellow poppies flamed upon the wind-swept pastures.

On hills and plains,
Lifting, exultant, every kingly cup
Brimmed with the golden vintage of the sun.

Beneath stainless skies, glittering gloriously, the carpet of California spread itself, bordered by lupine and nemophila, delicately interwoven with gillias and violets. Upon it walked George and Samantha.

Spring had kissed her into fresher and sweeter beauty. Youth glowed again in his eyes.

They were alone in the back pasture.

Till that moment Samantha had no reason to suppose that George's affection for her was other than fraternal. She had marked, of course, the change in his face, the elimination of lines drawn by suffering and insomnia. His laugh rang out spontaneously, but with him she was ever conscious of Hazel standing like a pale spirit between them.

They sat down.

She began to pick the poppies. George stared at the ocean. His own world lay beneath him. The Pacific, in a vague sense, stood for what was beyond the canyon, the unknown, unexplored element, immense, variable,

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treacherous. The peaks of the Coast Range affected him in the same unformulated fashion. Beyond them, as he knew, groaned and travailed a mighty nation. He remembered some of Hazel's phrases which she had used with telling effect, the "get up and get there" gospel. Furtively he glanced at Samantha, wondering at her placidity, watching the gentle rise and fall of her bosom, marking her strong, capable hands, the rich color on her cheeks, the soft, brooding eyes. Then he said abruptly:

"Hazel wanted me to leave the ranch."

Samantha was startled; sharply she drew in her breath:

"Yes; I know."

"She said it was too small fer me. Her notion was that a man like me, big an' strong, ought ter cut a wider swath. What do you think about that, Samantha?"

He did not look at her; he was gazing at the house below, at the reek of smoke curling from the kitchen chimney.

She did not answer for at least half a minute, selecting her words out of a limited vocabulary. George, she reflected, had never demanded her opinion upon matters of importance. It filled her with pride that he should do so.

Very slowly she spoke:

"My jedgment ain't wuth much, George."

"I'll tell ye this, Samantha; put it away fer keeps. Yer jedgment counts considerable with me. It always did count; but it counts more to-day than ever. You say out what's in yer mind. An' take yer own time; ye needn't to hurry."

"My jedgment, George, is agen Hazel's. She wasted

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good time thinkin' out what you'd ought ter do, an' you was *doin'* jest what she'd ought ter hev bin thinkin'. That's how I figured it out then, an' I've not changed my mind any. To my mind yer cuttin' a wider swath here in the Canyon than ye could anywheres else. An' if you went away it seems to me that ye might leave the best part o' yerself behind."

"Thunder! That's how I feel. Say, would you hate to leave the Canyon?"

.She hesitated, blushing.

"I—I got mighty homesick in San Clemente."

He seized her hand, gripping it.

"I want you to stay in the Canyon, Samanthy, with me. I—I want you to be my wife."

She averted her face. He saw that she was moved and distressed. Her voice quavered oddly:

"Lemme stand up, George!"

He released her, rising when she did. They confronted each other. A sickening doubt assailed him. Had she ceased to love him? He exclaimed passionately:

"I ain't lost ye, hev I? Hazel's dead ter me, Samanthy, but yer alive, an' I want you to live yer life with me, an' to help me live mine, here whar we both belong."

She murmured gaspingly:

"Wait. You tole me onct I was the goods."

"By thunder, you air."

"I ain't. I'm a wicked girl. I come mighty near lettin' Hazel die."

He was utterly confounded, remembering what Hazel had said, and remembering also his reply.

"I don't believe it."

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"It's true. I didn't go to her when I heard her scream. I stood watchin' her when she lay all of a heap in the hallway. I hate ter tell it, but I must. Ther was black murder in my heart."

Her tone carried conviction. George thrust out his chin, staring keenly into her eyes. Then he said sharply:

"I meant ter kill that Stocker."

"Oh, George; I was scairt to death you would."

"Was you? Did you love me the less fer that?"

"I dunno as I did."

"If I had killed him, an' if I'd got off, would you hev turned from me?"

"I dunno' as I would."

"You air the goods! I feel mean an' small beside ye. You saved Hazel, an', by God! ye've saved—me. I want you now harder 'n I ever wanted her. I'm mad fer ye, Samanthy. Ther ain't a bit o' my body or soul that ain't yours. An' I want all of you."

"It ain't pity?"

"Pity!" He seized her hand and thrust it against his heart, which was throbbing furiously. She looked up into his eager eyes and smiled.

"No," she said softly. "It ain't pity."

They gazed at each other hungrily. George laughed, and his laugh was good to hear.

"One more. If, to-night, I took my gun, an' robbed a stage, would you chuck me?"

"George, yer jokin'?"

"I'm dead serious. I want ter know. If I stole cattle an' horses, would you chuck me? No flimflammin'! You answer!"

"If you wanted me, I should want you."

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"Gee! Ain't you—great! Now, stan' still. You seen me kiss another girl not fit to black your shoes. I'm goin' ter kiss you twice as hard, an' ten times as long. Air you ready?"

"Yes."

Thus was a cruel memory effaced adequately. But, when George asked her to sit down Samantha protested.

"Ain't ther somethin' to do first?"

"What?"

"You guess. I'd love you to guess."

Did he guess? Or did she help him? Her soft eyes wandered to the house below.

George exclaimed triumphantly:

"I've got it. Tell Maw."

Hand in hand, like a couple of children, they ran down the golden slopes.

V

Mrs. Spragge was not in the house, nor about the chicken corral. George called her. Only the echo of his great voice returned to him.

"She's on the hill," said Samantha. "Let's go quietly."

They found her in the tiny graveyard. She did not hear them approach. Samantha touched George's arm. They stood still. Mrs. Spragge was sitting near the graves, not looking at them, but staring across the ocean. She was proud of her long sight, although she needed spectacles to see clearly objects close at hand.

"Shush-h-h!" murmured Samantha, afraid of startling her.

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Mrs. Spragge's hands lay idle upon her ample lap. Although she sat upright, still a strong, healthy woman, with many years of life ahead, her attitude indicated submission, not quite in keeping with an active dominant personality.

She was computing gains and losses. Such introspection is rare with men and women who work hard for others. Mrs. Spragge had always worked hard, taking pride in her work because it was done thoroughly. But the time was at hand when she would have to do less and think more. Joints were stiffening; fingers were losing their dexterity; a long day's washing tired her grievously.

Soon she must become a looker-on.

What would there be to look at?

Sorrowfully, she was endeavoring to resign herself to the abandonment of hope, to her inability to impose her will upon others. George and Samantha were dear children; she was fortunate, indeed, in such a possession; but they would remain brother and sister.

Her common sense revolted against the enforced celibacy of a man and woman so fitted to come together. What ailed them? How often she had asked that question!

Spring saddened her. Familiar sights and sounds exasperated a woman who had never, perhaps, realized how sensitive she was to them. A clucking hen, bustlingly proclaiming the laying of a first egg, pecked at her nerves. The buds on the rose bushes, the colors on the hills, the music of the tumid creek, became insistent, overpowering.

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She gazed across the ocean.

Within half a mile of her a great steamer was speeding south. The smoke poured black from the funnels; then it became gray; finally it dissolved into the blue.

Mrs. Spragge sighed. Her black humors would dissolve also. She was foolish to sit idly here with folded hands speculating upon the future. She could go on working till she dropped.

Her eyes followed the steamer till it became a faint blur upon the far horizon. Thinking of the men and women on board, the heterogeneous crowd traveling to strange lands and new activities, her mind focused itself upon Spragge's Canyon. She rejoiced because she was not in the steamer. After all, that had been her immense good fortune. She had helped to make a home; in that home she would die when her time came. That, at least, seemed certain. George would dig her grave, and she would lie down beside her husband and children—and rest.

Everything else, the issues beyond a mother's control, lay with God.

She rose stiffly, not turning her head, looking at the largest of the five green mounds. Church-going is not a synonym for religion with those who dwell in the wilderness. Mrs. Bungard sincerely believed Mrs. Spragge to be a pagan, because on the rare occasions when ministers of the gospel came to Aguila the Spragges remained in their Canyon. And yet, in the profoundest sense, she was a religious woman, if religion, apart from dogma, may be defined as the recognition of

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a divine force permeating life and exacting from life loyalty and reverence.

She knelt down, praying for strength to bear her burdens patiently.

When she got up from her knees she beheld the lovers silently awaiting her.



